

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Mike Shayne battles
the Black Lotus on
DOOMSDAY ISLAND
by Brett Halliday

A New Major
Lansing Novelet
DEADLY MEDICINE
by W. L. Fieldhouse

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DOOMSDAY ISLAND

by Brett Halliday

Shayne was outnumbered, but that didn't matter. He had to rescue Lucy Hamilton from the insidious Black Lotus, whatever the cost! 4

NOVELETS

DEADLY MEDICINE

W. L. Fieldhouse 59

SEA SHELLS 80

R. Tuttle 80

SHORT STORIES

IN THE CORN

Al Sarrantonio 90

WATER IN A TEACUP

Dick Stodghill 101

THE PIGEON PLUCKERS

Arthur Moore 106

PRESSURE

Dan J. Marlowe 113

CHOP SHOP

Mike Taylor 117

FEATURES

MIKE SHAMUS (Cartoon Strip)

Fred Fredericks 111

MIKE'S MAIL (Letters from Readers) 122

STIFF COMPETITION (Book Reviews)

John Ball 126

Shayne was outnumbered by fifty to one. But it was what was at the other end of the room that turned his blood to ice. Lucy Hamilton was suspended by cruel ropes, and beside her was Leiko, the Black Lotus, dressed in black, a whip in her hand. The Oriental woman had grace and a timeless beauty, but she was utterly mad. Shayne raised his gun. The Black Lotus had to die, no matter the cost!

Doomsday Island

by BRETT HALLIDAY

IN THE MIDST OF BEAUTY AND SPLENDOR, THERE WAS FEAR.

The man standing at the window of the hotel room was afraid. He knew he should not be exposing himself this way, knew that the shades and drapes should be closed over the large ornately-framed window. But he and the woman had been running, hiding, for so long, had lived with terror as the third member of their party, until he could no longer stand it. He had to look out the window and see the world they were running away from.

The hotel was a gabled and peaked *gasthaus* on the main street of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, a small resort village at the southern tip of West Germany. Towering over the town was the huge mountain called the Zugspitze, the highest point in West Germany, a peak that seemed to go up and up until its top was lost in the fluffy white clouds that dotted the blue sky. This part of the Bavarian Alps was indeed beautiful, here at the confluence of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. There was a time when this country had been home for the man at the window, but no more. Now he was only a stranger here, a man on the run, knowing that soon, inevitably, time would run out for him and the woman.

He wished that he was in the proper mood to appreciate the stark loveliness of the towering peak. But instead, there was a cold, hard ball of something rolling around in his stomach, making him unable to think of anything but the doom that pursued them.

She came up behind him quietly, slipping her arms around his waist and saying softly, "Don't worry, Rudi. We will make it. You'll see."

The man didn't know if she really believed that or not, but if she did, he didn't want to discourage her. He nodded and said, "Of course. The American promised us there would be no trouble. Of course we will make it, Anna."

He turned and let her come into his arms, tightening his embrace and lifting one hand to stroke the blond hair that he had always thought was so lovely. From the first time he had seen her, even in the ugly green gown across the operating table, he had known how wonderful she was. He was middle-aged, much too old to be falling in love at first sight, but what could he do about it? He thought, not for the first time, what a fool he had been to place her in this danger. How much better it would have been if he had forced the doubts out of his mind, forced himself not to ask questions and make waves. Contacting the American, though, that had been the worst mistake. Once that had been done, there was no backing out. He and Anna had been forced to run then, making their way slowly north, hiding in small hotels, using assumed names. His real name was Rudi Wolff, Dr. Rudi Wolff, and she was Anna Ulmer, but here in this *gasthaus*, they had two new names. He had lost track of how many names they had had since going on the run.

"No one could ever find us," Anna Ulmer whispered. "We're going to be safe, Rudi. We'll be in Frankfort in a few days, and the American will meet us and take us to the United States. We'll be all right there . . ."

"*Liebchen . . .*" Rudi Wolff murmured, feeling the familiar stirrings within him. Even in their fear, their love for each other was so strong, so powerful. Whether they lived or died, he was glad they had been together.

The door slammed open.

RUDI SAW THE MAN STANDING THERE, and for a moment, his heart seemed to stop. The man did not look that threatening, but Rudi knew better. He thrust Anna behind him even as she started to scream. He would protect her as long as he could . . .

The man in the doorway smiled inscrutably. He shook his head. In softly-accented words, his tongue having a bit of trouble with the guttural German phrases, he said, "Really, Dr. Wolff, you and Miss Ulmer should not have run away from us. You are a man of medicine. Intrigue does not suit you."

"I am a man of medicine," Rudi Wolff said, trying to keep his voice

from shaking too much. "That is why I have to do what I am doing. I could not let such an awful thing happen to the world, to all the innocent people —"

"You are a German, what can you know of innocence?" the man snapped, dropping his smile and his pleasant facade. He took a step forward, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Anna had a hand to her mouth, stifling the screams she felt welling up inside her. She managed to say, "How — how did you find us?"

"As I said," the man replied coldly, "intrigue is not for you. It was child's play to find you."

Rudi swallowed. "If you don't leave, I'll call the police."

The man smiled again, but this time the expression was an ugly one. He said, "Really, Dr. Wolff, you know that will be impossible."

"You can't kill us! There would be an investigation —"

"I hardly think so. No one will be the least bit curious about your deaths."

Rudi and Anna knew then what the man meant to do, and they both paled. Anna could hold back the scream no longer. As she shrieked out her terror, Rudi found himself lunging across the room toward the man, acting with a courage he had never known he possessed.

It did no good, of course. The man's hand snapped around and crashed into Rudi's head, sending him senseless to the floor. By the time he hit the polished wood, he was unconscious, oblivious to everything else as well.

For Rudi Wolff, the troubles of this life would soon be over, and for what it was worth, he had at least tried to do the right thing.

But for the world, the trouble was just beginning, and all of the middle-aged doctor's good intentions would not be worth a thing.

THE STORY MADE THE NEWSPAPER IN GARMISCH-PARTENkirchen. It was unusual enough to be of local interest. The man and woman found dead in their hotel room had appeared healthy enough when they checked into the *gasthaus*. But the doctor who examined the bodies had no choice but to declare that they had both died of natural causes. It was still a bit of a puzzle, though. Why would anyone in the final stages of terminal cancer come to a mountain resort in the Bavarian Alps? The townspeople thought about it and shrugged their shoulders. The man and the woman must have known they were going to die soon. Perhaps this was the way they wanted it, together in a spot of great beauty.

No one claimed the bodies, and they were buried there at civic expense, beneath the eternal grandeur of the mountains. The whole

thing was forgotten in a week.

It didn't make the papers in Frankfort, or Nuremberg, or Munich. And it certainly didn't make the papers on the other side of the world . . . in Miami, Florida.

MICHAEL SHAYNE WAS TIRED. He was wheeling his Buick through the streets of Miami, heading back toward his Second Avenue apartment. The time was just after midnight, and for the most part, the city was dark and sleeping. That was exactly what the big redheaded private eye had in mind for himself shortly.

The last twelve hours had been hectic ones. Shayne had spent them tracking down several hundred thousand dollars worth of stolen securities, and he was tired. Even though the case hadn't been as bizarre or dangerous as some of his recent ones, it had still been hard work, and he felt like he had earned the hefty fee that the owner of the securities had given him when they had been returned successfully. The check was folded up in Shayne's wallet, ready to be deposited as soon as the banks opened in the morning by his secretary, Lucy Hamilton.

Shayne turned off Biscayne Boulevard onto Second Avenue, piloted the Buick into the parking garage of the old apartment hotel that overlooked the Miami River, and killed the engine as he coasted into his regular space. Getting out and locking the car door behind him, he stretched wearily and then strode over to the elevator.

It took only a few minutes for the elevator to carry him up to the second floor of the building and for him to walk down the long hallway to the door of his apartment, the last one on the left. He had his key out and ready. Unlocking the door, he swung it open and stepped through, his hand reaching out to flick the lights on.

Shayne didn't hit the lights. He dove for the floor instead.

Rolling, he lashed out with a long leg, felt his big foot smash into something. Someone grunted in the darkness. The door was kicked shut, cutting out what little illumination had been in the apartment. Shayne lunged to his feet and whipped across the room in the darkness, knowing the layout of the furniture as well as he knew anything in the world.

The other man was trying to be quiet, but Shayne heard a soft breath, a slight rasp as the man bumped into a chair and shifted it slightly on the floor. Shayne moved silently, his nerves taut, and when he was ready, he grabbed and felt his fingers clutch the fabric of a coat.

Whirling around, Shayne pulled the other man with him. He ducked under a punch that he had sensed coming, let go of the coat with his

right hand, and used that fist to lash out into the shadows. His bony knuckles slammed into a stomach that was corded with muscles and felt like a washboard. The man made another slight noise of pain, and then Shayne felt a foot hook behind his left knee and jerk.

He staggered, trying to keep his balance. Hands gripped his left arm and now he felt himself spun around. Driving an elbow out to the side, he pulled away as the blow caught his opponent somewhere in the neighborhood of the sternum.

It was a quiet fight, with few sounds except the scuffle of feet, an occasional grunt, and the thud of fist against flesh. Shayne had pushed his tiredness aside. He had sensed as soon as he opened the apartment door that something was wrong. For a split-second, he had thought he was being paranoid, since he had been ambushed in his apartment several times during the last few months and was getting damned sick and tired of it, but then he had heard the whisper of cloth as someone reached for him. He hadn't been imagining things, after all.

Now he slipped a punch off his forearm and threw one of his own, feeling a satisfying tingle up his arm as it connected with a bony jaw. The other man staggered backwards, and Shayne kept after him, pressing his advantage. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness well enough that he could see his adversary as a vague shape in the shadows, but that was enough of a target. Shayne peppered the man with blows, shooting out rights and lefts that had all the power of his rangy frame behind them. The man tripped under the savage onslaught, went down to the carpeted floor.

The lights came on.

Shayne threw his hands up, trying to shield his suddenly-blinded eyes, and a cold, hard voice said, "Be still, Shayne. The last thing I want to do is shoot you."

II

SHAYNE DID AS THE MAN TOLD HIM TO: There was nothing else he could do, at least until his eyes got over the flare of light that made him see only huge floating spots.

He knew, too, that the kind of authority the voice carried was usually backed up by a gun. He believed the man when he said that he would shoot if necessary.

Slowly, Shayne turned toward the sound of the voice, blinking rapidly, trying to clear his vision. There was a shuffle of feet behind him, and he knew that his former opponent was getting back to his feet. The man with the gun snapped, "No, George! I think Mr. Shayne is going

to cooperate now and listen to what we have to say."

"Go to hell," Shayne muttered under his breath. His eyes were starting to adjust now, and he could see the man standing beside the door, one hand still poised by the light switch. The other one was holding a short-barreled automatic with a silencer screwed onto it.

"Just take it easy, Mr. Shayne," the man said. "We didn't mean to cause any trouble. It's just that George was a little surprised when you went after him like that. Like any well-trained animal, he fights back when he's attacked."

Shayne cast a glance back over his shoulder, saw the hulking figure in a chauffeur's uniform who was standing behind him and breathing slightly heavily. George was tall and broad and balding, with a face that looked a little bit askew, as if it had been rearranged a few times.

Looking back at the man with the gun, his eyes almost back to normal now, Shayne said, "What the devil is it you want, anyway? If this is a robbery, I don't keep much cash on hand."

The man with the gun smiled. "Hardly a robbery. No, Mr. Shayne, we merely wish to engage your services."

Shayne frowned at him. The man was slender and medium height, with dark hair and a lean, saturnine face. His clothes were expensive, and he handled the automatic as if he had been born with one in his hand. Shayne had seen his type before. A sleek, slick hood, but a hood nonetheless.

"You could have made an appointment at my office," Shayne growled.

"There was no time for that, I'm afraid. I'm really sorry we had to get into your apartment and wait for you here. But it was urgent that I speak to you as soon as possible."

Shayne lifted an eyebrow and nodded significantly at the gun. "It looks like I'm a captive audience."

"Not necessarily." The man suddenly reversed the gun and pitched it across the eight feet or so that separated him from Shayne. Startled by the action, Shayne still reacted quickly enough to pluck the gun out of the air.

Shayne palmed the gun around and brought it up as he sensed George stirring behind him. He trained the weapon on the dark-haired man and snapped, "Call him off."

The man shook his head sharply, and George subsided. Shayne didn't like having the big chauffeur at his back, but he felt a little better now that he had a gun in his hand. Unless . . .

"That's a nice grandstand play," he said. "But how do I know the gun is loaded?"

"Use your own, then," came the reply. "I'm trying to get across to you that you have nothing to fear from us, Mr. Shayne, and I don't care how I do it."

Shayne flipped the gun into his left hand and then used his right to pull his own pistol from the shoulder holster he wore. George made no move to jump him, and neither did the other man. Shayne swung around, feeling even better now that he held his own weapon, and motioned for George to join the dark-haired man.

"Now, I assume you feel more comfortable," the man said. "Ready to listen to my proposal?"

"Ready to call the cops," Shayne answered. "Unless you talk and talk fast."

"My name is Alec Traber," the man said. "Like I said before, I want to hire you to do a job. Your reputation as a private investigator is considerable, Mr. Shayne. Do you mind if I reach into my pocket?"

Shayne tilted the barrel of his pistol a little bit more toward Traber and grunted, "Go ahead."

Traber reached slowly and carefully into a jacket that must have cost him several hundred dollars and pulled out a fat envelope. He opened it, and Shayne saw the green of money . . . a lot of it. Traber rifled the edges of the bills, pulling them partially from the envelope, and said, "Fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Shayne. In cash. Plus other benefits that are negotiable. All for doing a simple little job."

Shayne knew the man was on the wrong side of the law now. No one else would be flashing fifty grand like that. He said sharply, "Forget it, Traber. I don't know what your job is, but I don't want it."

"How can you know that without even —"

"I don't have to hear about it," Shayne cut him off. "I know it's not my kind of job. Why don't you go peddle that loot somewhere else?"

Traber shook his head and clucked his tongue. At his left shoulder, George glared at Shayne darkly.

"You won't even give me a chance," Traber said. "This is a completely legitimate enterprise, Mr. Shayne. All I want you to do is deliver a package for me. A sealed pouch. Would that be so hard?"

"And what would be in it?" Shayne snapped. "Drugs you brought in from South America?"

"On the contrary. I can promise you no drugs are involved. And you'd be carrying it south instead of north. Have you heard of San Marigal? That's where the package is going."

IN SPITE OF HIMSELF, SHAYNE'S CRAGGY RED BROWS drew

down into a deeper frown as he considered what Traber had said. He tucked the gun Traber had thrown him behind his belt, then used the hand that had held it to tug at his earlobe. There was a great deal of illicit traffic of all kinds through the Caribbean, and a package going south would likely contain money. But Shayne had heard of the island of San Marigal, and as far as he knew, it had so far escaped becoming part of the drug pipeline. It was part of the Bahamas and had only recently been opened up and developed for the tourist trade, but already it was becoming one of the most popular resort spots in the Caribbean. Shayne had never been there, but he knew from people who had that it was a posh, expensive place. The more observant visitors also brought back the information that poverty existed alongside the wealth, but that was common throughout all the islands of what had once been the Spanish Main.

Traber saw the expression on Shayne's face and pressed on, thinking that the big redhead was weakening in his resolve. "One of those additional benefits I mentioned would be a week on the island after the job is complete, for you and as many guests as you'd like. I can promise you accommodations at the best hotel, all expenses paid."

"You're talking about a lot of money for a so-called simple job. If it's on the up-and-up, tell me what's in the pouch."

Traber shook his head, a sorrowful look on his face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne; that's one thing I can't do. You see, I'm acting on behalf of someone else, and they demand complete secrecy."

"That's what I thought. You can take that pouch and —" Shayne started to tell Traber what to do with it, then restrained himself and barked, "Get out of my home, both of you. I've been bothered enough."

"You're sure you won't change your mind?"

"I'm sure." Shayne took Traber's gun in his hand and flipped it back across the room. That seemed to surprise Traber as much as Shayne had been surprised before. But he caught the gun, too.

"Move out," Shayne went on. "Or I will call the cops."

Traber looked disappointed, but he put the gun away under his coat, along with the envelope full of money, and gestured curtly for George to precede him out the door. George looked back at Shayne, his face still dark and angry and beginning to show some of the bruises he had picked up in the brief fracas.

Traber cast one more strange glance at Shayne, then went out behind George and closed the door. Shayne stood where he was for several minutes, his gun out and ready, until he was satisfied that the two men had really left.

Then he holstered the weapon and heaved a long sigh. The last half hour had been a damn strange way to come home after a long hard day.

He walked over to the liquor cabinet and took out a bottle of Martell, then carried it into the kitchen and took two glasses down. One of them he filled halfway with the smooth cognac, the other with ice water. Sipping gratefully at the Martell and then taking a healthy swallow of the water, Shayne walked back toward the living room, ready to sit down, smoke a cigarette, and relax.

The rattle of gunshots knocked that plan right out the window.

SHAYNE SLAPPED THE GLASSES DOWN ON THE TABLE beside his favorite chair and sprang to one of the windows, jerking out his gun again. He pushed the curtain and shade aside and looked out into the darkened street.

A flash came, along with another shot, and Shayne could see that it came from a car that was picking up speed across the street. Closer to the apartment building, sprawled on the sidewalk, were two figures. Light from the building spilled out over them, and Shayne could see them well enough to recognize them.

Both of them had been in his apartment only minutes before.

No more shots came from the vehicle. It took a sharp corner on two wheels and then was gone in the night. There was no way he could catch up to them, Shayne knew. Whoever was in the car must have been waiting outside to ambush Traber and George, just like those two had waited inside Shayne's apartment. The results of this ambush looked a little more serious, though.

Shayne whipped across the room and out into the hall, running down it and bypassing the elevator in favor of the stairs. He took them three and four at a time, charging out through the lobby past the stunned night clerk and through the doors onto the sidewalk.

Traber was still alive, Shayne saw that right away. The man was writhing around on the sidewalk, clutching his side and trying futilely to climb to his feet. But George was still and quiet, and there was a spreading pool of darkness underneath him.

Shayne threw the door of the building open again and yelled to the clerk, "Ambulance and cops!" Then he knelt down beside Traber and put a hand on his shoulder, trying to hold him still. "Take it easy," Shayne grated. "Help's on the way."

Moving carefully, Shayne pulled one of Traber's arms back enough so that he could see the wound in the dim light. It had his elegant white shirt stained crimson, but it looked like the bullet had simply clipped him in the side, causing little more than a graze. Painful and bloody,

but not too serious.

George was another story, as Shayne had thought.

The big man was dead, his middle ripped savagely by slugs. Shayne didn't try to move him. There was no point in it.

An ambulance screamed up several minutes later, followed closely by two patrol cars. Shayne rode to the hospital in the ambulance with Traber, George, and one of the policemen. The cop, one of many on Chief Will Gentry's force with whom Shayne was acquainted, took down Shayne's story.

At least as much of the story as Shayne told.

THE WAY THE BIG REDHEAD TOLD IT, the two men had been visiting him in his apartment and had just left when they were ambushed. No, Shayne didn't know of any reason why anyone would want to shoot them. It was all a mystery to him, and he hadn't gotten a good enough look at the snipers' car to be able to describe it.

He didn't like holding back on Gentry's men, but he wanted to talk to Traber again before he spilled the whole story.

As much as Shayne disliked concealing evidence, he liked it even less when someone who had asked for his help was gunned down in the street. It didn't matter to him that he had already turned down the job. His nose for trouble was working now, and Traber was going to tell him just what the hell this was all about.

First, though, Traber had his wound cleaned and dressed at the hospital and answered the same questions Shayne had. He claimed that he had no idea who had shot him, or why. The cops had no choice but to accept his story. They left the emergency room doctors to finish up with Traber, then went to call in their report.

Traber was sitting up on an examining table, stripped to the waist and white-faced with pain as an intern taped up the wound in his side. Shayne lounged against the wall nearby and gazed speculatively at him.

Traber met Shayne's look and said shakily, "What we talked about earlier, Mr. Shayne —"

Shayne nodded, his face gaunt and hard. "I'll do it," he said simply. A look of gratitude washed over Traber's face, replacing the pain for a second.

"It will be at your office in the morning," Traber said softly. "All the arrangements made. All right?"

Shayne nodded again. The intern got a hypo ready and was approaching Traber with it. Traber asked, "What's that for?"

"Sedative," the intern answered brusquely. "You're going to be

staying the night, pal."

Traber shook his head determinedly. "I can't," he insisted. "It's impossible."

The intern looked stern and was about to reply, when the door to the emergency room opened again and a man carrying a briefcase came striding in. He was accompanied by another doctor, one who appeared to have quite a bit more authority than the intern, and the three of them went into a huddle. Shayne looked on curiously, feeling vaguely like he had seen the man with the briefcase somewhere before. He couldn't pull a name out of his memory, though.

The upshot of the conference was that Traber was free to go. Shayne exchanged a look with him as the man with the briefcase started to lead him out of the emergency room, and the big detective knew that it meant everything would go ahead on schedule.

Shayne felt a little bit dizzy from the lightning-quick events of the evening. He was already starting to curse himself for agreeing to deliver the package for Traber, but at least if he did, he might find out just what the nocturnal visit and the shooting had been all about.

Shayne hoped it was something illegal. He wanted more than anything else right at this moment to get the goods on Traber. The man with the briefcase had probably been a Mob lawyer, and Shayne was damn sure that something was rotten in this whole business. It didn't take much of a detective to know that.

He walked out of the hospital, saw Traber getting into the back seat of a big black car. A faint smile curved Shayne's lips as he watched it pull away. He would find out what was going on, all right . . .

And then, he was willing to bet, all hell would break loose.

III

SAN MARIGAL IS A PARADISE — ALL YEAR ROUND!

The posters in the airport fairly screamed their message at Shayne. He walked with the other passengers toward the baggage claim area, surrounded by the happy chatter of tourists who had come to sample the charms of this tropical island. Shayne supposed he looked a little out of place and tried not to let the expression on his face get too grim.

In his left hand was the small case, much like a diplomatic pouch, that had been waiting for him at his office that morning when he arrived. Lucy Hamilton had told him that it had been delivered by a messenger, along with a large manila envelope. Shayne had taken both the pouch and the envelope into his private office, highly aware of Lucy's curious gaze, and settled down at his desk to look them over.

The pouch was zipped tightly shut, and the clasp wouldn't work for him. He had expected it to be locked. To judge by the weight and feel of it, there wasn't much inside it, but it definitely wasn't empty. There was a rectangular lump in the middle of it. A bundle of hot money, maybe?

There was money in the envelope, that was for sure. The fifty grand that Traber had shown him the night before was there, along with a sheet of paper with several single-spaced lines of typed instructions.

They were simple enough. Shayne was to take the one o'clock flight from Miami to San Marigal; his ticket would be waiting at the terminal. Upon arrival, he was to proceed to the Hotel Eden, where a suite was reserved in his name. He was to deliver the pouch to someone named Eagle, who would also be staying at the hotel. Under normal circumstances, a very easy assignment to carry out, and when it was done, the suite at the hotel would still belong to Shayne for a week. But he doubted that these circumstances were normal, not with the murder of George and the attempt on Traber's life.

Shayne had debated turning the pouch over to the Miami police, then decided against it. If he was getting mixed up in some kind of criminal operation, it extended to San Marigal, too. It would be better to wait until he got there and contacted this Eagle; then he could bring the authorities in on it.

He had given most of the money and the check from the previous case to Lucy for her to deposit, then told her that he would be going out of town for a few days on a new case. She had looked up at him with her lovely brown eyes and said, "What's it about, Michael? Is it anything I can help you with?"

Shayne had reached out, ran a blunt finger along the softness of her cheek. "You can help me by staying here and holding down the fort while I'm gone, Angel. You don't want to go to a stuffy place like San Marigal, anyway."

Her eyes lit up. "San Marigal! Why, Michael, that's the number one vacation spot right now. It's supposed to be a paradise."

Maybe it was a paradise, Shayne mused. Judging by the brightly-colored posters stuck up everywhere, that was how it was being promoted. But there could always be trouble in paradise.

He had been adamant about Lucy not coming with him on this one, and he had to smile as he strode through the new San Marigal airport and remembered the pretty pout that had made a brief appearance on her face. No matter what she said or did, he had the feeling that he was involved in a very dangerous situation, and he was damned if he was going to expose her to it needlessly.

IT TOOK ONLY A FEW MOMENTS TO PICK UP his battered old suitcase. Once he had it, he walked quickly to the big glass doors that led outside. San Marigal was a U.S. possession, so he didn't have to go through customs. His next move, he supposed, was to get a taxi and go on to the Hotel Eden, where he was expected.

He wondered if he was expected anywhere else.

As far as he could tell, no one was paying the least bit of attention to the soft leather pouch he carried, but he knew that meant nothing. He didn't expect the other players in this game to be wearing signs.

As he pushed through the glass doors to the sidewalk outside, the heat hit him like a fist. The temperature was in the upper nineties, with the high humidity that was inescapable in this part of the world. The fronds of the palm trees that lined the boulevard outside fluttered in the gentle, warm breeze. Shayne supposed that it was cooler on the other side of the island, where the hotels were. This side was a bit higher, with much less vegetation. Across the island, a trip of three or four miles, the terrain sloped down to the sea again, and that part of the island did resemble a paradise, with lushly-carpeted hills and valleys covered with palms, shrubs, and many different kinds of vines and wild flowers.

Shayne saw several cabs parked at the curb, most of them older American cars, but they were all clean and shiny, no little feat in this salty atmosphere. Some of the tourists who had been on the plane with him were boarding them, but one or two of the hacks were still unoccupied. Shayne went over to the closest one.

"Hotel Eden," he said, opening the back door and putting his suitcase inside. The driver hadn't stirred from behind the wheel, but he turned and gave Shayne a grin.

"You bet, man," he said. His tones had an accent that sounded faintly Bahaman, but it wasn't quite the same. It was definitely musical, though.

Shayne settled back in the seat as the driver pulled the car away from the curb, rolling his window up and punching the air conditioner on as he did so. The unit clattered slightly, but Shayne could feel the cool air it was putting out, and he was grateful for it.

The driver merged into the traffic on the busy road, then gave Shayne another grin in the rear-view mirror and said, "You got to get rid of that coat and tie, man. You gonna melt down here if you don't."

"I think you're right," Shayne said. He swept his hat off and loosened his tie. The rest could wait until he reached the hotel. The heat shouldn't have been much worse here than in Miami, but it seemed like it was.

Shayne was trying to watch the traffic around the cab, and behind it as well. Everyone on the road seemed to be smiling. He saw tourists in rental cars and natives in vehicles about the same vintage as the taxi, and they were all looking happy. San Marigal must be a pleasant place to live, Shayne thought.

A bullet punched through the glass behind him.

SHAYNE DUCKED AS SLIVERS OF GLASS SHOWERED AROUND him. The hackie let out a yelp and started to slam on his brakes. Shayne shouted, "No! Floor it!"

The cab surged forward again as Shayne bent low in the seat and jerked his suitcase open. He hadn't been allowed to carry his gun on the plane, but it was packed away beneath his shirts. It took only a second for him to dig it out once he had the case open, and as he started to straighten with it in his hand, he was jolted to the side by something slamming into the cab.

The driver was keeping up a running stream of frightened howls and angry curses. Another bullet shattered a side window, and the cab was hit again by the other car that had raced up beside it. Shayne could see it now, a dark green fifteen-year-old Buick that was made like a tank. The irony of its make didn't escape Shayne, but he had more important things on his mind at the moment.

Like staying alive.

There were some small cuts on his hands from the flying glass, but he ignored them as he snapped his gun and squeezed off a quick shot at the attacking car. He could see at least three men in the other vehicle, but he could tell little about them except that they were natives.

The taxi driver was doing an admirable job, considering that he must have been scared out of his wits. He whipped the cab around slower-moving cars adroitly, but he couldn't shake the pursuing Buick. More slugs screamed off the body of the cab, and the Buick's fenders kept grinding into it every few moments.

Shayne fired as fast as he could through the broken window and saw the two men in the other car who were doing the shooting start to duck frantically. He yelled to the driver, "Brakes!"

The man responded, slamming his foot onto the brake pedal. Shayne was thrown forward against the back of the front seat. Smoke and a loud squeal rose from the tires of the cab as it slowed to a stop.

The Buick hadn't been expecting that. It shot on past, but Shayne saw its brake lights flaring, too. He slapped the door on his left open and dropped out of the cab, using it as a shield.

The driver of the Buick had whipped the wheel around as he braked, sending the heavy car into a sliding turn and bringing it around to face Shayne and the taxi now. Shayne heard other cars braking and skidding as they tried to avoid the stopped cars. He held his breath and hoped that no one else plowed into them.

The doors of the Buick were popping open. One of the men spilled out, holding a shotgun. He started to bring it around.

Shayne shot him, the bullet shattering his collarbone and making him fling the shotgun away as he spun around in agony.

Shayne fired again, sending the second man diving back into the Buick. They must not have expected him to put up such a fight, because the driver put the Buick in gear again and spun the wheel as he fed it gas. It made a wide, sweeping turn, barely missing a produce truck, churned across the boulevard median with its palms, and then spurted away in the opposite direction. Shayne snapped one more shot after it and saw it miss, then stood up and glanced over at the driver of the cab.

The man was looking up at him with wide, terrified eyes, but he was able to say, "You ain't no tourist, man."

"No," Shayne said, getting into the back seat again and brushing glass off his coat. He slipped his gun into his pocket. "I'm not a tourist. Just a businessman, here on business. Understand?" He took his wallet out and extracted one of the bills that he had brought along from Traber's envelope. Dropping it over the front seat, he went on, "Will this cover the damage and the fare on to the hotel?"

The driver looked down at the denomination of the bill, counted the zeros, sucked on a tooth for a moment, and said, "You betcha. We get out of here right quick, right?"

"Right," Shayne agreed. "The Hotel Eden, remember?"

The man grinned, put the taxi back in gear, and got moving again.

Shayne heaved a sigh and looked down at the pouch beside him on the seat. It was a certainty now that he was expected by more people than just the hotel staff. Someone had known he was coming.

And they had been willing to kill to get their hands on that innocent looking little pouch

IV

"WELCOME TO SAN MARIGAL, MR. SHAYNE!" the desk clerk at the Hotel Eden enthused. "How do you like our little paradise so far?"

He was getting tired of hearing this place called a paradise, Shayne reflected. After being shot at and nearly run off the road, he was begin-

ning to doubt the validity of the claim, anyway. But he just grunted, "Fine. I think you've got a suite reserved for me."

"Of course," the man smiled. He was swarthy, but not as dark as most of the natives. More Spanish than black, Shayne supposed. And he had a clipped British accent that seemed to be very appropriate for an employee of the Hotel Eden. It had a Colonial look to its lobby, which was full of rattan chairs, potted palms, and slowly turning ceiling fans. The fans were more decorative than functional, though; the whole place was cooled by a central air conditioning system.

The lobby was busy, too. People were bustling through it wearing everything from tennis outfits to bikinis. Shayne hadn't been able to keep from casting an appreciative glance at some of the scantily-clad women as he entered the hotel. The taxi, with its shattered windows and battered fenders, had drawn some curious looks, but no one stopped Shayne to ask him about it. Evidently, the people here were so busy having a good time that they minded their own business.

The clerk snapped his fingers and a uniformed bellboy appeared at Shayne's side. Shayne smiled thinly and shook his head. "I've just got one bag," he said. "I can handle it, if you'll just tell me where to find my suite."

"Whatever you wish, Mr. Shayne. It's the Emerald Suite, on the second floor, overlooking the bay. I can have the boy show you the way . . ."

"Thanks anyway," Shayne replied, taking the key that the clerk held out. "I'll find it. There is one more thing."

"Certainly, Mr. Shayne. What would you like?"

"Could you tell me what room Eagle is in?"

The clerk frowned. "Eagle? I don't recognize the name, I'm afraid. Would that be Mr. Eagle, or Ms. Eagle?"

Shayne shook his head and said, "I don't know. But I was supposed to meet someone named Eagle at this hotel."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne." The man flipped through the registration cards to be sure, then said, "No, there is no one here registered under that name, and no reservations in that name. But should they arrive —"

"You'll let me know," Shayne finished. "Thanks." He turned away from the desk and walked toward a broad, curving staircase on the other side of the lobby. Three young women in bathing suits were coming down the stairs, and they smiled at him as he passed them. Like everyone else, they seemed to have no interest in the pouch.

Shayne knew better, though. He would be willing to bet that at least one pair of eyes was surreptitiously watching him at that very moment.

If not for the attack on the way to the hotel, he might have thought that he was being a bit paranoid, but not now. Not after the gun battle in the middle of the boulevard.

HE FOUND HIS SUITE WITH NO TROUBLE, and when he walked into it, he saw why it was called the Emerald Suite. The walls and ceiling were painted that color, and the furnishings were all different shades of green. Maybe that color was supposed to be restful to the eyes, Shayne thought, but right now, all it did was remind him of the fifty grand he was being paid for this crazy job.

Unpacking didn't take long. He stripped off his coat and shirt and went into the luxuriously appointed bathroom to start the shower running. After the trouble on the way to the hotel, he felt like cleaning up would make him feel better. He lit a cigarette, then scooped up the telephone and got room service. They would be glad to provide him with a bottle of Martell and plenty of ice water, they said, and Shayne was glad to hear it.

He stood under the streaming water from the shower for several minutes, enjoying the feeling as it pounded against his rangy frame, alternating the hot and cold until his pulse was racing and his skin was tingling. When he cut the water off, he stepped out onto inch-thick carpet and wrapped a huge green towel around him. Being in this place was almost like being in the jungle outside, he thought. It would be enough to get on a man's nerves after a while, too.

For the moment, though, he was feeling better. He picked up the gun from where he had left it on the vanity beside the sink and strolled back into the living room of the suite, snugging the towel around his waist.

Shayne went to the French doors that opened out onto the suite's balcony and pushed back the drapes that covered them. He had an excellent view of the beach, dazzling white sand surrounding the brilliant blue waters of the bay. There were plenty of people there, enjoying the sun and the sand and the soft waves.

THE NEXT MOVE WAS UP TO THE OPPOSITION, Shayne knew. He had done as instructed, and he had little doubt that the mysterious Eagle would show up sooner or later. When he did, Shayne planned to grab him and turn both him and the pouch over to the local authorities. There had to be representatives of the U.S. government on the island, and they could get to the bottom of the mess.

Assuming they believed his story. Shayne frowned and lit another cigarette, his forehead above the red brows corrugated. They might

think he was part of the operation; well, he was to a certain extent, he supposed. But with the backing of Will Gentry and some other connections he had in high law enforcement circles, he was sure he could convince anyone that he had only been playing along to find out what had been behind the murder in the street outside his apartment building.

He was holding his pistol loosely in his right hand as he looked out through the small opening he had made at the side of the drapes. When a polite knock came on the door of the suite, Shayne turned and lifted the gun. His casual air was gone now.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Room service, sir," a male voice answered through the door. "Your bottle of Martell, sir."

Shayne crossed the room and threw the latch on the door, then took several quick steps backward. He stood so that he could hold the gun behind his back and not look too awkward. "It's open," he said. "Come on in."

The door swung back, and a young man, perhaps twenty years old and wearing the fancy livery of a hotel servant, stepped through it carrying the bottle of Martell and a pitcher of ice water. Shayne watched him closely, but he seemed to be exactly what he was supposed to be.

The man was smiling. He didn't look directly at Shayne. He said, "Where would you like these, Mr. Shayne?"

"Over on that table will be all right," Shayne replied. He didn't move from where he stood.

The young man pivoted and took a step toward the table Shayne had indicated with his free hand. Shayne kept watching him —

But the last thing he expected was for the cognac bottle to blow up.

ACTUALLY, IT WAS ONLY THE TOP OF THE BOTTLE that blew up, and it was only flying off as the tremendous pressure of the gas inside was released. It was no accident that the bottle was pointing toward Shayne when it happened.

The stream of gas billowed across the room, coiling in acrid streamers around his face, stinging his eyes savagely and filling his lungs with a fire-like mist. Shayne coughed and brought his gun around and up. The last thing he had been able to see clearly before the disguised gas gun had blinded him was the waiter leaping toward him. Shayne squeezed the trigger.

As the gun blasted, something smashed into Shayne's wrist, driving his hand down. The bullet plowed harmlessly into the floor. Shayne

gasped and staggered, lashing out with the gun, but it didn't connect with anything. He felt hands grabbing at him, heard the rush of more footsteps. The treacherous young man had had help waiting out in the hall . . .

They bore him down, at least four or five of them. Fists slammed into Shayne, and the gun was plucked from his hand. He tried to fight back, but the superior numbers of his opponents plus the effects of the gas, were too much for him to overcome. By the time his eyes started to clear and he was able to get his coughing under control, he was tied hand and foot, strong cords looped around his wrists and ankles and then tied around the legs of heavy sofas and chairs so that he was effectively spread-eagled.

When his vision did clear, he almost didn't believe his eyes. There were six of them, all wearing hotel uniforms, but they had taken hoods from somewhere and placed them over their heads, so that their faces were lost in shadow. The somber black cowls above the colorful uniforms should have looked ludicrous, but Shayne didn't feel like laughing.

They all had knives in their hands.

"An unbeliever has come into our midst," one of them intoned solemnly, while Shayne pulled on his bonds and found them solid. "All unbelievers must be punished and destroyed. Only then will our world be purified for those who have seen death and conquered it!"

It was all crazy, Shayne thought, struggling with the cords that held him helpless on the floor. The hooded servants began to chant, a low, ominous sound, and Shayne felt a chill go trickling down his back like ice water. Crazy or not, they meant him no good, and he knew it.

Even stunned and groggy from the gas, his mind was working enough for him to realize that they had really been prepared for him. It would have been simple enough to rig a gas gun in a bottle of Martell . . . but why the hell would anyone do that unless they knew Mike Shayne was involved? And if they just wanted him dead, there were simpler, easier ways to do that.

They were circling him now, still chanting, hands waving the sharp points of their knives in the air in intricate patterns. After a moment, they stopped, and Shayne saw that they were arranged around him in a precise pattern. One was at his feet, one at his head, and two on each side. The one at his head seemed to be the spokesman. Shayne tilted his head back so that he could see the man, as the hooded figure said in a ragged voice, "Death to all unbelievers! Now, my brothers, let us spill this man's blood for the glory of the cult!"

The knives started to come down, all six of them.

THE DOOR TO THE SUITE SLAMMED OPEN, and a gun barked, the shots coming so close together that they sounded like one long blast.

One of the cultists howled in pain and dropped his knife, and the others all whirled around, seeming to forget about Shayne. Shayne twisted his head, trying to see what was going on. As far as he could tell, someone had come to his rescue. There was a man standing in the doorway, blasting away at the servants with a small caliber automatic. He was shooting to wound, though, not to kill. Three of the hooded men already were clutching at bloody arms and shoulders.

One of the others flung his knife, the throw coming close enough to make the man with the gun duck. The cultist shouted, "Run!" to his men, and they all sprinted for the balcony doors.

They were through the doors and vaulting the low railing before the man with the gun could get off any more shots. As Shayne bellowed, "What the devil —", the man rushed past him and went to the balcony. He came back a moment later, shaking his head.

"Sorry, Shayne. They all got away. I couldn't very well start blasting into that crowd of tourists they landed in. Well, they didn't get a chance to carve you up, anyway." The man knelt beside Shayne, picking up one of the fallen knives and slashing through the bonds quickly.

Shayne sat up and studied his rescuer. The man had a face that was neither young nor old. He was lean, didn't appear to be overly tall, and had sandy blond hair that was cut short. There was a faintly Ivy League look about him, due to the horn-rimmed glasses he wore, but at the same time, an air of competence, which he had certainly demonstrated. He smiled, just barely, and went on, "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Shayne said, climbing to his feet. "But I'll be better when I get some pants on. Looks like I had you figured wrong."

"What do you mean? We haven't met, have we?"

"I saw you last night in the hospital, when you came to get Traber. You were carrying a briefcase." Shayne stepped into a pair of pants as he spoke, then picked up his gun from where it had fallen on the floor during the fight. He turned and brought it up, training it on the man. "Now, why don't you tell me just what the bloody blue hell is going on here?"

The man nodded slowly. "I suppose it is time you knew. Jones said you could be awfully stubborn when someone tried to hide things from you."

"Jones . . . ?" Shayne said slowly. "Oh, hell. Not again."

"YOU CAN CALL ME JASPER," THE MAN SAID. "I really am sorry about the trouble you've had, Shayne, but that's all part of the business, I suppose."

"Not my business," Shayne snapped. "I'm no goddamn secret agent."

His mind went back to the two times previously when he had met the government agent who was called simply Jones. Shayne had found himself involved with, first, a terrorist group that had tried to blow him up twice, and second, Russian agents, a top-secret satellite that had crashed in the Florida Keys, and the enigmatic but beautiful woman known to intelligence agencies around the world as the Black Lotus. Shayne had met her first on yet another case, involving gang warfare in Miami, and both times he had encountered her, she had professed her love for him . . . then left him seriously wounded, to live or die according to the whims of fate.

"Listen, Shayne," Jasper was saying, "I know maybe we shouldn't have gotten you mixed up in this —"

"Damn right you shouldn't have," Shayne interrupted him. "But now that I am, how about telling me about it, so that maybe I can stay alive. Was this Jones's idea?"

Jasper shook his head. "I'm in charge of this operation. I just got some input from him about who might be the best man to get to the bottom of it."

Shayne still had the gun in his hand. He grunted, put it in his pocket, and started getting into a shirt. "Bottom of what?"

"We've lost four agents in San Marigal in the last month, Shayne. We want to know why."

Pausing in spite of his anger, Shayne ran a thumbnail along his jaw and asked, "Do you know what they were working on?"

"We're not sure. The first one was sent here to look into the emergence of that cult you got a first-hand look at a few minutes ago. He disappeared, and one-by-one the others came to try to find out what happened to him. The next two vanished, too, but the fourth one was fished out of the bay, next thing to dead. He got one message to us before he died mysteriously in the hospital. That message consisted of one word — Eagle."

"And you know who Eagle is?" Shayne asked.

Jasper nodded. "One of the local gangsters. He's mixed up in what little drug traffic San Marigal has. He used to have a good deal of power on the island, before it became a U.S. possession and the resort

developers were allowed to come in. Then, it was an extremely crime-ridden place, what with all the poverty. That's changing, thank God."

Shayne's eye fell on the little leather pouch, sitting on a table across the room. He strode over to it, pulling a small clasp knife from his pocket. Jasper watched him closely but said nothing as Shayne used the blade to rip an opening in the top of the pouch.

Plunging his hand inside it, Shayne came up with the lump he had felt earlier. His face darkened in a scowl as he stared down at pieces of newspaper, cut into roughly the same shape as bills and tied together into a bundle.

"It was all a goddamn trick!" he grated. "Traber is one of your people, another spook!"

"Alec Traber is one of our agents," Jasper admitted. "The term spook is usually applied to CIA operatives, though. We don't work for the CIA."

"I don't care what set of initials you go by," Shayne said. "You're in the same business — death and deceit. What about George? Were you willing to sacrifice him just to get me to sympathize with Traber and take the job?"

A SHADOW PASSED OVER JASPER'S LEAN FACE. "We had nothing to do with that. Whoever is behind the loss of our agents here on the island found out that Traber was working on the same operation and took steps to eliminate him, hopefully before he could recruit you." Shayne's eyebrows raised as Jasper went on, "Oh, yes, they know you're in on it now, too, Shayne. Like you said, maybe it's deceitful, but you're in it, as far as the enemy's concerned."

"What's to stop me from getting on the next plane to Miami and saying to hell with you and your operation?"

"Nothing," Jasper shrugged. "Except then you'd be completely on your own, with assassins still after you. You came in here as a stranger, asking for Eagle. That was enough to get you into trouble."

Shayne looked intently at Jasper for a long moment, then shook his head slowly. "You really set me up, didn't you?" he said. "You roped me in, played on my curiosity, and then sent me here as a target. You wanted to see what would happen when I tried to contact Eagle. You probably even hoped that someone would grab me, so that you could tag along behind."

Jasper pushed his glasses up on his nose and coughed softly. "We didn't expect them to try to sacrifice you," he declared. "I did stop them from that, you know."

"Because I'm not any good to you dead." Shayne took a deep

breath and tried to control the anger he felt surging through him. He hated being used, and this slick operative called Jasper had done exactly that, calculatingly and callously. "And you don't have any idea what this is all about, why those agents disappeared and were probably killed?"

Jasper shook his head. "It can't be entirely because of this cult that's sprung up. We had heard reports of cultists intimidating other natives, out in the small villages away from the resort area. There were even rumors of human sacrifices. But I just can't believe that a simple group of religious fanatics would be well organized enough to go after Traber like that, or after you, for that matter." He prodded what was left of the rigged Martell bottle with one expensively-shod foot. "It took someone with skill and experience to gimmick this bottle like that. Those kind of experts aren't usually found in a place like San Marigal."

Shayne asked, "Is there anything else going on in the world that it might tie into?"

"We've considered that," Jasper replied. "We have one operation going on in Europe at the moment that's pretty sensitive, and something of a mystery. We *had* it going on, I should say. A man contacted us and said he had some very important information to pass on, about a threat to the safety of the world. But he had to have a promise of protection for himself and a woman with him before he would tell what he knew. We tried to set up a meeting with him, but he and the lady died before they could get to a safe spot."

"Don't cranks claim to know about all kinds of conspiracies all the time?"

"True enough. But as I said, these two people were killed. At least I think they were, even though the death certificates said Natural Causes. Maybe I'm being overly suspicious, but you get into that habit in my line of work."

"Mine, too," Shayne grunted. "What connection did they have with San Marigal?"

"None, on the surface. But the man was a doctor at a clinic in Switzerland, and the woman was a nurse there, as well. A very exclusive clinic, I might add. Some of the patients there might well be the same people who vacation in San Marigal."

Shayne looked doubtful. "That's reaching a long way, don't you think?"

"When there's nothing else to reach for, what do you do?"

"All right," Shayne said. "You've got a couple of murders — maybe — in Europe, one dead agent down here and three others

missing, a bunch of crazy cultists trying to hack me up into little pieces, and a boss of the local mob." His voice lowered ominously. "Just what the hell do you expect me to do about it?"

"Keep trying to contact Eagle," Jasper said forthrightly. "Now that you're in the game and know what's going on, what else can you do, in good conscience?"

"I'll tell you," Shayne said with a savage grin. "I can boot you right out of this suite."

"You don't mean that."

"The hell I don't! Get out, Jasper, and don't show your face around me anymore. I don't want anything to do with your damned spy business!"

JASPER LOOKED AND SOUNDED SHOCKED, as he said, "But, Shayne, your country needs —"

"My country doesn't need me bad enough to lie to me," Shayne declared. "You should have come to me and put your cards on the table from the first. You'd think you bastards would learn sooner or later that I don't like being tricked!"

Jasper swallowed. "We can double your fee."

Shayne grinned again. "Don't be so sure I'm as mercenary as I've always been painted. Some things money still won't buy. Now get out."

"You mean it, don't you?" Jasper sounded believing now.

"You bet I mean it. And don't worry about the rent on the suite. I'll be out tonight. I think there's a flight back at eight o'clock."

Jasper just stared at him for several seconds, then snorted disgustedly. "I can't force you to help us," he declared. "But I warn you, you're being foolhardy, as well as very stubborn. You'll still be running the same risks, as long as the enemy thinks you're working with us."

"Well, maybe if I go home, they won't think that anymore. Are you leaving, or do I —"

"I'm leaving," Jasper snapped. "But I'm staying here at the hotel if you change your mind. Goodbye, Mr. Shayne."

The agent stalked out, slamming the door behind him. Shayne looked around at the disheveled state of the room. The fight with the cultists had pretty well scattered things.

Shayne's grin grew wider. He still wanted that Martell.

If Lucy Hamilton had been there, or Shayne's old friend, reporter Tim Rourke, or Will Gentry or even the man known as Jones, they might have recognized the gleam in his gray eyes. Despite what he had said to Jasper about wanting no part of this case, too much had hap-

pened for him to walk away now.

Mike Shayne was no secret agent, but he was in this business up to his neck, and he wasn't backing out now.

But he had always been a loner, playing his own hand, and jumping to Jasper's commands didn't sit right. It would be better if he tried to find out just what was going on by himself, he thought as he finished dressing. Then he could call in Jasper and his organization if it was necessary.

Something had been behind the five deaths that had probably taken place. Shayne still thought that connecting them to the deaths of the doctor and nurse in Europe was stretching things, but he had to admit it was possible. Hell, based on the things he had gotten mixed up with in the past, *anything* was possible.

HE WAS DRESSED CASUALLY WHEN HE WALKED INTO THE bar downstairs, just off the lobby of the hotel. Shayne grimaced when he saw it was called the Paradisio Room. Somebody had really gotten stuck for original names down here. He was wearing a lightweight jacket, with his shoulder rig underneath it, and the weight of the pistol as it rode under his arm was a comforting one. What he had in mind was placing himself out in the open, making himself a target, just as Jasper had intended. Now he was acting for himself, though, not as someone's puppet.

There was no one he recognized in the bar, Shayne saw as he cast his eyes around its shadowy interior. The room continued the motif of the lobby, with ceiling fans and a lot of bare wood. It was a comfortable-looking place, but Shayne felt a long way from being at ease as he slipped onto a stool at the bar.

The bartender wore the same uniform as the other hotel employees, and for a moment, Shayne wondered if he had been one of the knife-wielding cultists. The big detective said, "Martell, ice water on the side," when the man came over to take his order.

Shayne lit a cigarette as he waited for his drink to arrive. He thought back over the events of the last hour or so, wondering about the lack of attention that the ruckus in his suite had attracted. It could be that the thick walls of the hotel had muffled it enough so that no one else was disturbed. But it was possible that the rest of the hotel staff knew what was supposed to happen and had been expecting a commotion. That might be a little farfetched, too, but he wasn't prepared to discount anything now.

The bartender brought Shayne's drink, but instead of presenting a

tab for him to sign, the man just said, "Compliments of the lady in the corner, sir."

Shayne frowned and asked, "What lady?" He turned slightly on his stool.

The bartender indicated a woman sitting in a booth at the rear of the room. She was facing away from Shayne, and the dimness of the room made it impossible to tell much of anything about her except that she had dark hair.

Shayne felt a tingle at the back of his neck. Apprehension was forming an unexpected knot in his stomach. He suddenly remembered what Jasper had said about the doctor from the clinic in Switzerland, and he stood up slowly, leaving the cognac untouched on the bar.

He walked through the tourist chatter that filled the room, toward the booth where the woman sat alone. Shayne knew very well that he was probably walking into a trap, but that was what he had had in mind.

He hadn't expected it to spring quite so soon, though.

Pausing beside the booth, he said quietly, "Hello, Leiko."

She looked up at him with a dazzling smile, still as beautiful as ever, seemingly untouched by the radiation that had poisoned her during their last encounter. It should have killed her months ago.

But Shayne was beginning to believe that the Black Lotus would never die.

VI

SHE SAID, "HELLO, MIKE. HOW NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN." And then Shayne heard the footsteps behind him and felt the gun barrels pressing into his back and side. "Please, sit down," the young woman Shayne had known as Leiko Smith went on. "We have much to talk about, you and I."

Shayne glanced over his shoulder. Two men had come up behind him. They were San Marigal natives, both dressed in business suits, and looked eminently respectable. But they were each holding a gun and grinding the barrels into Shayne.

"We don't have anything to talk about, Leiko," Shayne said.

"Ah, but we do. I want to know why you are here on this island, and what your connection is with the men who are my enemies. Please. Sit."

She moved her eyes, and the guns went away from Shayne. The two men stayed close, though. He was sure that to the tourists in the place, nothing looked wrong. Just a knot of friends standing around a

booth. Shayne watched Leiko closely, saw the coldness in her eyes beneath the facade of pleasantness, and did as she asked. He sat down on the other side of the booth.

The two men went to a table a few feet away and sat down, conversing quietly between themselves. But their eyes never left Shayne. He turned back to Leiko and said, "This place is damned unfriendly for a paradise. First some goons in hoods try to chop me up into little pieces, and now your flunkies jab me with guns."

"The unpleasantness in your suite was not meant to be," she said quickly. "My followers were only instructed to bring you to me. They sometimes become overzealous, though."

Shayne studied her as she spoke. She seemed no different from the last time he had seen her. She was wearing white slacks and a white halter that set off her golden skin and long raven hair. Her face was still lovely, with its Oriental features and just a hint of some other ancestry. He was still stunned that she was here, alive, when she should have been dead, but from the time that Jones had told him about a woman matching her description entering a radiation and cancer research clinic in Switzerland, he had been expecting her to show up again.

"They knew you were involved, or suspected as much," he said, mostly to himself. "That's why they roped me in on it."

Leiko shook her head. "Pitiful fools. Such men are not worthy of being your allies, Mike. You are far superior to them. They have never done anything except try to manipulate you. You would be much better off joining forces with the side that is destined to emerge victorious."

"Your side," Shayne said flatly. "You always make the offer, Leiko, then you go off and leave me to bleed to death."

She shrugged prettily. "You exaggerate."

"No, I don't." He leaned forward. "How the hell did you survive that last business, anyway? That satellite component should have leaked enough radiation to kill you a dozen times over."

Her smile was cryptic. "My blood is special, the blood of a man who should have ruled the world. And I was lucky, also. I was cured of my sickness and made the greatest discovery of my life, all in the same place."

"I don't understand."

"You will." She stood up suddenly. "Come. I will show you the wonders of San Marigal."

"I don't need the grand tour," Shayne muttered.

"Please. I do not ask many favors so politely, Mike."

He could believe that. She was easily the most ruthless person he

had ever known, male or female. And he *had* wanted to find out what was behind all the trouble he was mixed up in.

He just hoped that finding out didn't get him killed.

"I'll come with you," he said. "I don't really have any choice, do I?"

Leiko had a car waiting outside the hotel, a medium-sized newer vehicle. Shayne got into the back seat with her, while her two watchdogs got in the front.

"The temple," Leiko said to the man behind the wheel.

"Yes, mistress," he replied.

When they were moving through the late afternoon traffic, Leiko turned to Shayne again and said, "I am truly sorry about the way my followers treated you, Mike. The Cult of the Lotus does tend to inspire fanaticism. But when its high priestess has conquered death and given that gift to her followers . . ." She shrugged eloquently.

SHAYNE TRIED TO KEEP TRACK OF THE ROUTE they were taking. The driver proceeded through the luxurious hotel area, then passed into an older section of the city. The farther they got from the bay, the shabbier the buildings. Soon, many of them were little more than hovels, and Shayne was amazed at the squalor, when less than two miles away was all the elegance anyone could ever want. The car began to climb into the hills overlooking the bay, and though Shayne tried to watch the landmarks and the turns, he was soon hopelessly lost as the car wound around through the lush jungle on roads that were little more than paths.

There was no mistaking the landmark that was their destination, though. It rose out of the jungle abruptly, almost filling a clearing that had been hacked out in some forgotten time. The building loomed castle-like from the surrounding greenery, built of huge, weathered hunks of stone that looked like they had been there for hundreds of years. Leiko confirmed that guess for him.

"The Temple of the Lotus," she said. "Built in the late fifteen hundreds. Of course, it had another name originally, but the present one suits it just fine. This is my headquarters, Mike, and if you like, you can be a part of it."

The driver looked back over his shoulder and said hesitantly, "I do not think Eagle will like this, mistress."

"Eagle is no longer your master," Leiko snapped at him. "I am the High Priestess of the cult of the Lotus, and I am in charge now! Do you understand?"

The man swallowed nervously and said, "Of course, mistress. I mean no harm."

He parked the car at the edge of the clearing, then got out with the other man to hold their guns on Shayne as the big detective left the car with Leiko. There was no need to hide the guns now. Except for the birds flitting about in the tops of the trees, the four of them seemed to be totally alone in the jungle.

Shayne saw just how wrong that estimate was when Leiko walked haughtily over to the temple and pressed on one of the huge stones. An opening emerged slowly as a whole section of the wall began to creak upwards. Men wearing military-looking fatigues and carrying rifles stepped out from it briskly.

If Shayne had had any doubts about the magnitude of this operation before, this put them to rest. Leiko appeared to have fielded a small army here on this tiny island, composed of both fanatical cultists and efficient soldiers. And the machinery required to equip the temple with that sliding door wouldn't be easy to come by, either.

Behind the soldiers, another man came sauntering out. He was a native, wearing a lightweight white suit and sunglasses. His hair was close-cropped, and his face had a cruel cast to it. He glanced in Shayne's direction, then looked at Leiko and said sharply, "I thought I told you to have him killed."

"You advised me to have him killed, Eagle," Leiko replied, and her voice was cold enough to chill even this tropical air. "I rejected that advice."

So this was Eagle, Shayne thought. He looked like what he had been, a small-time hoodlum with inflated ideas of his own power, but he was still a dangerous man. Leiko disregarded the look he gave her and took Shayne's arm. "Come, Mike," she said. "I want you to see the Temple of the Lotus."

SHE LED HIM INTO THE OPENING, with Eagle, the two men who had been in the car, and the squad of guards following. Shayne smelled a faint, strange odor in the air, and a ripple of remembrance went through him. Once before, the Black Lotus had kept him in a drugged state without him even knowing it, through the use of a special perfume she wore. That perfume had had the same scent.

So chances were that everyone in the place was staying slightly drugged, he thought. He would have to remember that for later. And he would have to fight against it affecting him.

The massive door slid closed behind them, and fluorescent lights flickered into life. Shayne's brows drew down in a surprised frown.

This castle-like temple might have been built four hundred years ago, but it had undergone considerable renovations inside since then. The hallways were all well lighted, and they passed rooms full of complicated equipment. Shayne saw computer consoles and laboratories, radar tracking stations and armories full of weapons. He knew that this was what the missing agents had stumbled onto, the reason they had wound up missing. There was a hell of a lot more to this than just a cult; Jasper had been right about that. And as for the deaths in Europe . . .

"Why kill the doctor and the nurse?" he asked abruptly. "Just because they knew you were still alive?"

"Goodness, no," Leiko said. "They were going to tell the agents from your government what I was planning. They wanted to be part of the plan at first, before they thought it over and changed their minds. We could not let them expose our operation until we are ready to unveil it to the world, though."

"We?"

"My partners and myself. You'll meet one of them, Mike. He's the greatest doctor who ever lived."

Shayne cast back in his memory to the last time he had spoken to Jones. "That would be Doctor Podbillon, of the Podbillon Clinic."

"And the inventor of the Podbillon Process," a new voice said proudly. Shayne looked over to see a man in a lab coat standing in a doorway. Behind him was another room filled with lab equipment. The man was short, with gray hair that came down in a sharp widow's peak on his forehead and prominent, almost popping, eyes. "Dr. Jeremy Podbillon, Mr. Shayne," he went on. "I do hope you'll be as intelligent as Leiko tells me you are and join our little enterprise."

"And what is that enterprise?" Shayne asked, not really expecting an answer.

He got one from Leiko. She said in her soft voice, "Why, it is simple, Mike. We intend to rule the world. Either rule the world . . . or destroy it."

VII

SHAYNE HAD TROUBLE NOT GAPPING AT HER. Her voice sounded deadly serious, and as he looked into her eyes, he knew that she meant exactly what she said. Trying to keep the shock out of his voice, he said, "Just how do you intend to do that?"

Podbillon answered before Leiko could speak. "The whole world will know of the Podbillon Process soon enough, Mr. Shayne," he

said. "For the moment, it's enough that you know we *can* do what we say we can. The world will have a choice of submitting to our enlightened rule, or dying. I hardly think the people of the world will be foolish enough to choose the latter. Now, how about you? What do you choose? Are you with us?"

Shayne shot a glance at Leiko, very aware of the presence a few feet away down the hall of Eagle and the armed guards. "Is that the choice?" he asked the beautiful Oriental girl. "I either join up with you or die?"

"I'm afraid so, Mike," she said. "Would it be so awful to be part of a new elite? To be part of it with me?"

Shayne hesitated before answering. He saw the looks being directed toward Leiko by both Podbillon and Eagle. From the expressions on their faces, they had both envisioned themselves being Leiko's consort, and they weren't too enthusiastic about her offer to Shayne. Eagle still wanted to kill him, he knew; Podbillon probably wouldn't go that far, but he wouldn't care if someone else did the job without him knowing about it.

There was no point to that speculation, though. Shayne wasn't going to join this mad scheme, not even if the alternative was death. But he knew he had to get away somehow, had to let Jasper know about the temple, even if he didn't know the details of Leiko's plan yet.

"We must have an answer from you, Mike," Leiko prodded gently.

Shayne nodded. "I'll join you. Of course, I'll join you. What choice do I have?"

Eagle exploded. "He is trying to trick us. Don't do this, Leiko."

"I told you, I give the orders here," Leiko told him imperiously, swinging toward him. She took a step closer to Eagle as the mobster stepped forward, too, and Shayne realized that they were both between him and the guards.

HE MOVED BEFORE ANY OF THEM KNEW what was happening, looping an arm around Podbillon's neck and jerking him around. The doctor let out a strangled gasp, making Leiko and Eagle spin back around. Shayne flung Podbillon at them as hard as he could.

Podbillon couldn't stop himself. He plowed into Leiko and Eagle, and all three of them staggered into the guards. Shayne lunged forward, whipping an arm around and smashing the side of his hand against the back of Eagle's neck. The man started to fold as Leiko cried, "Don't kill him! Don't kill Shayne!"

Shayne was past the guards now, scooting through the momentary opening like a tailback smelling the goal line. The guards were right

after him, and he knew his chances of getting away were very slim.

He rounded a corner, full-tilt, and almost ran into another guard, drawn by the commotion and shouting. The man never saw the bony fist that laid him out. Shayne had the guard's rifle in his hand before the man's unconscious body hit the floor of the corridor.

Whirling, Shayne triggered off several quick shots, making the pursuing guards dive for cover into the labs and giving him a few extra seconds. The thought flashed through his mind that he was crazy to be taking on a whole temple full of armed men. But the alternative was death, sure and final. At least this way he had a chance to save himself and get word to Jasper, even though the chance was next to non-existent.

He sprinted down the brightly-lit corridors that looked so out of place inside the ancient structure. His running footsteps echoed back at him from the thick walls. He could hear the pursuit behind him, continually closing the gap.

Shayne turned another corner and saw the huge door to the outside, down the hall in front of him about fifty feet away. There were two guards there, and they were ready for him. Slugs screamed past his head as he ducked back around the corner.

The others would be catching up to him in a matter of seconds. Shayne whipped out of his jacket and flung it into the corridor where the door guards could see it, and as soon as they instinctively blasted away at it, he was plunging forward in a dive, hugging the floor as he triggered off four shots.

The guards were slammed back against the wall, their rifles clattering away. Shayne was on his feet in an instant, charging toward the door. There were several control buttons beside the huge slab of rock. He didn't have any idea what any of them did, so he started slapping all of them as fast as he could.

The door started to rise with a squeal of gears.

Shayne didn't wait. When the opening was little more than two feet high, he pushed the buttons again and saw the door start to descend slowly again. Dropping to the floor, he rolled under it, even as bullets from the other guards began to pock the walls and floor around him.

He thought for a second he was going to make it unscathed, which would have been a major miracle. But then something crashed into his head, making the whole world spin crazily for a second. He came up on his hands and knees groggily, realizing that he was outside now and the door was closed. He put a hand to his head and it came away bloody. It didn't seem to be a serious wound, though. Probably a stone fragment or a spent ricochet had caught him. He lurched to his feet,

using the rifle butt to help support him.

The jungle was only a few yards away. Getting into it was his only chance. And he was sure that Leiko's native guards would know the area a lot better than he did. Still, that was the only thing he could do. He started toward the greenery at a shambling run.

Vines caught at him as he plunged into it, leaves whipped him in the face. His head was pounding now, and he was having trouble seeing straight. He wasn't sure how far he had gone into the brush when something suddenly tripped him up. Dropping the rifle, he tried to catch himself, but he landed heavily enough that all the breath was forced from his lungs.

Lying there on the soft jungle floor, gasping for air, trying not to black out, Shayne was totally unprepared for what he saw next. A pair of bare feet appeared beside his head. He started to roll over and grab for the rifle, but all his strength picked that moment to desert him. He slumped limply again.

Shayne didn't feel the strong hands that lifted him easily. For the time being, Mike Shayne was gone, far, far away from this island of tropical pleasures. Where he was, there was nothing but black . . .

VIII

THE BLACKNESS LASTED A LONG TIME. When it finally went away, the first thing Shayne saw was a beautiful light brown face looming over him.

The girl smiled brilliantly when his eyes flickered open. She spoke softly, an island patois of English, Spanish, and French intermingled. But she was telling Shayne to lie still and take it easy, and he wasn't going to argue with that.

Another voice spoke from the side, and Shayne slowly turned his head to see the speaker. This was a man, and he was saying, "You are safe here, *Senor Shayne*. No need to worry."

He was a short, squat man, wearing a ragged shirt and pants that were a little bit too short for him. His feet were bare, and Shayne thought they looked familiar. He remembered the flight through the jungle abruptly, the whole escape from the temple coming back to him. Adrenalin shot through his veins as it all came flooding back, and he started to come up off the crude bed on which he was lying.

The girl caught his shoulders and held him down. He must really be weak, he thought, for a lovely slip of a girl like this to be able to restrain him.

"None of the damned cultists or guards around here," the man said

from the other side of the room. Shayne could see now that he was in a hut of some kind. It looked like it was constructed primarily of scrap lumber, but the only furnishing he could see, the bed he was lying on, was comfortable enough.

Shayne's lips were cracked and dry. He ran his tongue over them and asked huskily, "Where am I?"

"The village of Malogrado," the man said. "It means *ill-fated*. I hope that you do not make that name come true, *Senor* Shayne. Please, tell no one that we helped you."

"How . . . how do you know my name?"

The man shrugged. "We checked your wallet. Your money is all still there; don't worry about that."

"I'm not," Shayne murmured. "Hell, I'm just grateful that you didn't let the guards from the temple get me." He had to pause for breath, then went on, "I guess we're pretty close to the temple?"

"We are. That temple of the damned is only about a mile away."

Shayne grimaced. The girl was wiping his forehead with a damp cloth she had produced from somewhere. He said, "You say that like you know what goes on there."

"Evil dwells there," the man said softly. "Evil that has corrupted many of the island's young men into that death cult. They say they have the power over death now. I say that only God has such power, and the people in this village agree with me."

Shayne managed to sit up slowly, over the girl's protests. He asked, "Why did you help me? I might have been one of them."

"Not the way you were fleeing from them. And any enemy of theirs is a friend to my people." He came over to the bed and extended a hand. "I am called Roberto. The girl is Cecilia."

Shayne shook with him and smiled with as much strength as he could muster at the girl. "Mike Shayne," he said. "And I definitely want to be a friend to your people."

Shayne considered it to be little short of miraculous that he had been found and hidden by friendly villagers before the guards from the temple caught up with him. Over the next twelve hours, he found out how lucky he was. His head wound kept him lying down most of the time, but Cecilia stayed with him constantly, tending to his needs. Roberto was there much of the time, too. He seemed to be the leader of the villagers of Malogrado, and he told Shayne much about the changes on the island since the strangers had appeared at the deserted old temple.

"They seduce the young men with promises of power and glory," Roberto said. "And then they make them participate in the rite of

death that they practice."

"The rite of death?" Shayne asked, frowning.

Roberto nodded. "Yes. The new members of the cult are made to be sick, sick almost to death. They claim to be brought so close that they can spit in Death's face. Then they are brought back to the world of the living, invincible now after going through the ceremony."

Shayne puzzled over that one for long moments. The cultists that had been shot by Jasper at the hotel had been anything but invincible. He had no way of knowing what kind of symbolism the rite held, though. All that was certain was that Roberto and the remaining citizens of Malogrado despised the temple, the cultists, and all they stood for.

ROBERTO REFUSED TO LET SHAYNE LEAVE, and for long hours, Shayne was too weak to force him to do otherwise. Besides, he knew that he would probably need help getting back to the city, and Roberto was the only source of help around.

He had awakened in the late afternoon, almost twenty-four hours after escaping from the temple and being wounded. When another night had gone by, Shayne felt much stronger, and his head wasn't nearly as dizzy when he sat up and moved around the hut. The wound on his head wasn't deep, a small scratch in the middle of a good-sized bruise. A slight concussion was possible, but overall, he felt capable of functioning.

Roberto must have agreed, because he drove Shayne back into town in the village's one pickup. Cecilia was sorry to see him go, and Shayne had to admit, after having her nurse him for the night, he was fond of her as well. But he waved and promised to come back to Malogrado someday if he could, and then the village was left behind in the jungle.

As they drove toward the city, Roberto asked, "You are trying to stop the people in the temple, *Senor Shayne*?"

"You'd better believe it," Shayne grunted. He hadn't told Roberto about what was really going on at the temple. He didn't know all the details himself, and he didn't want to scare the villagers any more than they were already.

He couldn't give his head any more time to heal, though. It was imperative that he get in touch with Jasper as soon as possible, so that the agent could organize a raid to clean out the nest of vipers in the temple.

When he swung down out of the cab of the truck a few blocks away from the Hotel Eden, he left a hundred dollar bill on the seat. Roberto saw it and started to shake his head, when Shayne cut in on his protest.

"My life is worth much more than that to me, *amigo*. Permit me at least a small token."

Roberto nodded. "Very well. My villagers can use the money. We are poor people, but honest, *Senor Shayne*."

"I know. Thank you."

Roberto smiled, his dark face creasing, and put the truck in gear. Shayne didn't wave as it moved off into the traffic. He didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than was necessary. That was one reason he had asked Roberto to let him off a little distance from the hotel. It was possible, even likely, that Eagle had his street contacts on the lookout for a big, rugged redhead from the States.

Marching right into the hotel was dangerous, Shayne knew, but he didn't see what else he could do. Once he made contact with Jasper — if he made contact with Jasper — he would probably be safe enough. The time for subterfuge was over, anyway. From now on, it would be open hostilities between the Black Lotus and everyone else she thought of as an enemy.

SHAYNE STRODE QUICKLY TO THE HOTEL, pushed through the glass doors into the lobby, and crossed to the desk. "Is Mr. Jasper in his room?" he asked the clerk bluntly.

The man shook his head, staring at him. Shayne supposed he did look a little strange compared to the usual run of wealthy tourists that frequented the hotel. His clothes were dirty, he wore a small bandage on his head, and he was pretty well drawn and haggard after his experiences of the last two days.

"Mr. Jasper went out earlier, I believe," the clerk said. "But his friend is here."

"His friend?" Shayne asked sharply.

"Yes. Mr. Traber. He arrived yesterday."

Shayne leaned forward. Traber would do just as well as Jasper, if he could get a message back to his headquarters and get some more agents — or the goddamned Marine Corps, for that matter — in here to stop Leiko. "What room is Traber in?"

"Room 317," the clerk answered. "But I don't think he is feeling well. He called down a little while ago and asked for a doctor. The doctor should still be with him, in fact."

Shayne spun around without another word and left the clerk gaping after him. This time he took the elevator, riding up to the third floor and then all but running down the corridor, looking for Room 317.

When he found it, the door was opening and a stocky, middle-aged

man carrying a black bag was coming out. Shayne snapped, "You're the doctor?"

The man frowned at him, but nodded. "I am. And you look as if you can use one, if you don't mind my saying so. What's the matter?"

Shayne nodded toward the interior of the room. "Traber? How is he?"

The look of professional sympathy that appeared on the doctor's face made Shayne's heart sink. "Was he a friend of yours? I'm so sorry. He was a very sick man, you know, died within minutes after I got here. He should have been in the hospital."

"He's dead?" Shayne whispered, not wanting to believe it.

"I was just on my way to call the police. They have to be notified in all cases of death, you know." The doctor shook his head and made clucking noises with his tongue. "I'm really very sorry. How long had Mr. Traber had cancer, do you know?"

Shayne frowned, confused by the question, confused by the whole damn situation. "Cancer?"

"Yes, that looks like the cause of death. Offhand, I'd say he was all but eaten up with it. All the major organs were affected. I believe an autopsy will tell us exactly what was involved."

"No," Shayne said softly. "I don't think it will."

THE DOCTOR LOOKED AT HIM QUIZZICALLY, but Shayne just turned away and walked slowly past the elevator to the stairs. He went down one flight and turned toward his suite. He had already checked and found that he still had the key to the door. He wanted to get inside and get on the phone. The man called Jones was a hard person to contact, but Shayne thought he might be able to do it, if he called enough people he knew in Washington. The word about Leiko and her temple had to get out *somehow*.

Shayne reached the Emerald Suite and unlocked the door, stepping in cautiously. He was expecting an ambush as soon as he opened the door, but none came. Closing it and locking it behind him, he walked toward the phone. His hand reached out for the receiver.

A knife flashed past his head and thunked into the wall, to hang there, quivering.

"I carry more than one knife, Shayne," Eagle said from the door that led to the balcony. "If you want to try something, that is."

Leiko's voice came from behind him. "No, Eagle. Mike Shayne is still important to us." She appeared at his shoulder and came on into the room, staring at Shayne with an enigmatic expression on her lovely face. She went on, "I am glad you are still alive, Mike. I only wish you

had not been lying when you said you would join us in our project."

"What the hell did you expect?" Shayne grated. He looked around as he heard the door from the hallway opening again. Four men slipped in, all of them carrying pistols. He wasn't the only one who had a key to this room. It was clear now; the influence of the Black Lotus had spread all over this island. San Marigal was her own private playground now, whether the tourists knew it or not.

"Eagle wants to kill you," Leiko said. "He wants to take one of his knives and use it to peel your skin off while you are still alive. But you are too valuable for that, even if you are too stubborn to see the truth of our path." Her voice dropped. "Even if you do not feel anything for me, as I believed you did once."

Shayne caught his breath, trying to keep his face from contorting into a grimace of rage. He had nearly loved her, when they had first met, and that made everything else about the situation worse.

"I'm not going to help you," he said flatly.

She went to the telephone and began to dial a number, while Eagle and the guards watched Shayne closely. "We shall see," she said. "One of our renovations at the temple, Mike, was the addition of a telephone line. It is a mixture now of the old and the new, just as our world will be when we control it." Someone answered on the other end, as Leiko said into the receiver, "The woman. Bring her to the telephone."

Shayne suddenly felt colder than he had ever felt in his life. It was a cold of the spirit, and it all but froze his soul.

"Perhaps you will now join me because of your love for someone else," Leiko said. "Listen well, Mike."

Shayne heard the words coming thinly from the phone, and even distorted by the machinery, he recognized the voice.

"Michael! What's happening, Michael? Who are these people? You've got to help m —"

Lucy Hamilton's voice was cut off abruptly.

Leiko was smiling, and it was the evilest look Shayne had ever seen. She said, "I know all about you, Mike. I know now who you love. And she will die if you do not help us. Now what is your answer?"

There was nothing — God, *nothing* — he could do. They had Lucy, and he believed every word Leiko said now.

"What is it you want from me?" Shayne asked, trying not to see the look of triumph on her face.

IX

"THAT'S RIGHT," SHAYNE WAS SAYING AN HOUR LATER. "The

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cultists are planning on assassinating all six of those Senators coming to visit the island. And the hit is planned for tonight." He paused and listened to Jasper's excited squawking over the phone for a moment, then went on, "I know it's crazy. What do you expect from a bunch of lunatics like that?"

Inside, he felt like groaning in frustration. Jasper was accepting the lie, and there was nothing Shayne could do about it. Not as long as Lucy was in Leiko's hands. For the moment, Leiko's plan was right on schedule.

"I didn't leave after all," Shayne continued his explanation to the agent. "They grabbed me again, and I found out what they were planning before I got away. Now do something about it, man! I did my part."

Eagle pushed none too gently on his knife, and Shayne felt the point pricking the skin of his back through his clothes. The two of them were alone in Shayne's suite. Leiko and the others were gone, heading back to the temple. Only Eagle had been left, to make sure Shayne did his part in the deception.

It was simple enough, what Leiko wanted. One of her people among the hotel staff would let it slip to Jasper on his return that the big red-headed American had shown up again. When Jasper contacted Shayne, Shayne would tell him the story that Leiko wanted to hear. And then Jasper and whatever agents he could muster up would be off on a wild goose chase to the wrong side of the island. There really were six American Senators arriving on the island that evening, on a joint vacation, but Leiko had dismissed them with a wave of her hand. Whatever her plan was, it was much bigger than killing six politicians.

Shayne had a vague idea of what the plan involved, and he was scared . . . damned scared. But there was the threat to Lucy hanging over his head . . .

Jasper had called Shayne from the lobby as soon as he heard that the big detective was in his room, not even delaying long enough to come up to the second floor. Shayne had told him the lie, and now Jasper was saying, "I'll have two dozen men at the airport when that flight arrives. Good work, Shayne! You may have just saved a bunch of lives."

Shayne couldn't take it anymore. He grunted, "I'll send you a bill," and hung up. He took a deep breath. Jasper would be too busy from here on out, trying to foil the imaginary assassination, to bother any more with Shayne.

"Very, very good, Shayne," Eagle chuckled, still grinding the knife into Shayne's back. "You should have been an actor instead of a

detective. Actors live longer."

"I did what she wanted," Shayne snapped. "Now, will you call her and tell her to let my secretary go?"

There was a mirror on the wall in front of Shayne, and he could see Eagle shaking his head over his shoulder. "I don't think so. You really do know better, don't you, man? You've done your part."

"And I'm not worth a damn thing to you anymore, is that it?"

"You knew all along it would end like this, Shayne. You may be dumb, but not that dumb. Don't worry about your lady, though. We'll take good care of her."

Shayne could feel Eagle tensing to drive the blade into him. He said softly, "Damn you."

He twisted as Eagle thrust, feeling the knife rip his coat and shirt and start to slice his skin. His hand was still on the phone, and he took the instrument with him, whipping it around as he spun. Eagle let out a cry of anger.

Shayne slammed the phone into the other man's head as hard as he could.

There was a cracking noise. Shayne thought it was the phone, but as Eagle staggered away from him, hands clapped to his head, Shayne saw that the phone was all right.

Eagle pitched forward to the floor.

Shayne could feel the knife, still hung in his coat. He reached back to get it and felt a steady flow of sticky wetness. A wave of dizziness went through him. He had lost quite a bit of blood from the head wound earlier, and now he had a gash in his back that was leaking crimson. He tried to ignore the pain and stepped forward to kneel beside Eagle.

The gangster's head was pushed out of shape on one side. The phone was a lot harder than Shayne had expected it to be. Or maybe it was just the hate and anger with which it had been swung.

Eagle was dead. Shayne stood up slowly and was glad. The man had wanted to kill him all along, and once Shayne had done what Leiko wanted, the Black Lotus had given him permission to do as he wanted.

And now that Shayne had successfully decoyed Jasper away from the real plan, Lucy would be expendable, too.

He could try to contact Jasper again. The agent probably didn't even know about Traber's death yet. Everything was moving too fast. Shayne tried to make his brain work, tried to think of what to do next.

One thing was certain. If there was an attack on the temple, Lucy would die for sure.

But if he could get inside some way, get her loose and out of there before anyone knew what was going on —

Shayne sagged, catching himself against the wall. He rested for a moment, then straightened and stripped off the blood-soaked coat and shirt. He went into the bathroom, leaving an occasional drop of blood on the carpet, and examined the wound as best he could in the mirror. It was a ragged cut several inches long, and he knew a doctor would sew it up. There was no time for that, though. The medicine chest in the bathroom was fully stocked. He doused the wound with disinfectant, gritting his teeth as it burned in, then covered it with gauze and taped it up tightly. It was only a quick patch job, but it would have to do.

He splashed cold water on his face, then dressed in fresh clothes. The cut wasn't hurting quite as much now; the pain had died down to a dull, consistent ache. He was a little stiff, but overall, Shayne thought he was in better shape than he had any right to be, considering all he had been through.

Casting a glance at Eagle's sprawled body, Shayne went out the door and slammed it behind him.

THE DESK CLERK DOWNSTAIRS WAS ONLY TOO HAPPY to rent him a car. Shayne had watched closely as Roberto drove him from Malogrado, and he thought he could find his way back there. He hated to involve the villagers once more, but he knew he couldn't locate the temple again on his own. They would have to lead him to it.

Shayne took a couple of wrong turns after he reached the hills above the city, but he found Malogrado anyway, feeling a surge of relief when he spotted the little village. Dogs ran out yapping to greet him, and he saw Roberto emerging from one of the huts.

"*Señor Shayne!*" the squat native exclaimed as Shayne got out of the rental car. "You are back so soon. Is something wrong?"

"Very wrong," Shayne said, taking Roberto's arm. "Is there someplace we can talk in private?" The other villagers, Cecilia among them, were beginning to crowd around.

"Of course." Roberto jerked his head behind him. "In my hut. Come. Tell me what is wrong."

Shayne told him, once they were inside, away from the curious ears of the villagers. Roberto looked alternately angry and sorrowful as Shayne explained about being forced to help the evil ones from the temple.

When Shayne was done, Roberto sighed and laid a hand on Shayne's shoulder. "Any man who truly loves a woman would understand why you did as you did, *Señor Shayne*," he said. "And why you feel like you must go to that place now. What can I do to help?"

"Take me there," Shayne said. "I'll go in by myself, but I need you to guide me back there."

"Do you have a weapon?"

Shayne shook his head. "I thought I'd take one off a guard."

Roberto went to a ramshackle chest in one corner of the hut and came back with a pistol. It was a .45, Army surplus most likely, but Shayne loved the feel of it in his hand when the villager handed it to him.

"It will be night soon," Roberto said. "When do you wish to go?"

"Now."

"I thought you would say as much. You know it is foolhardy to do this? Surely you have friends who can help you?"

"Not in time," Shayne said. "My only chance is to go in alone. Silent and quick. That's how it has to be."

Roberto nodded. "Of course. Some things a man must do."

They ignored the questions of the other villagers and plunged into the jungle. Shayne saw the wistful glance that Cecilia gave him, but he had no time to think about it. It took all his concentration to keep up with Roberto, who moved like a brown shadow through the clinging undergrowth.

They spoke little, and that in whispers. Some twenty minutes after leaving Malogrado, Roberto motioned for Shayne to get down, and they crept forward on hands and knees for several hundred more yards. Then Roberto parted a bush silently, and Shayne could see the temple, looming hugely in the dusk, when he looked over the villager's shoulder.

Moving up beside Roberto, Shayne breathed, "I'll take it from here. Thank you, Roberto."

"I will not try to talk you out of this," Roberto whispered back. "And I am sorry I cannot accompany you. I am not much of a fighter, though. But I will stay out here and watch, so that I can help you when you come back out."

Shayne knew that was meant as a vote of confidence, so he grinned despite the throbbing headache behind his eyes and the pain in his back from the knife wound. He squeezed Roberto's arm and then slipped away into the shadows, moving toward the temple with a quiet grace rarely found in so big a man.

AS HE CRAWLED TOWARD THE PLACE WHERE HE KNEW the opening to be, he thought back over the case to keep his mind off what he might encounter inside. He was pretty sure now what the so-called Pobillion Process was. Going by the fact that the two deaths in Europe

had been attributed to natural causes and the way Traber had looked in Miami, Shayne knew that the secret had something to do with cancer. Traber had seemed to be the picture of health in Miami, apart from the bullet wound he had suffered in the ambush; he hadn't matched at all the doctor's description of a man in the final stages of cancer.

Shayne thought about the spectres that the very word conjured up, and a shudder ran through him. If he was right in his speculations, Doctor Podbillion had developed a way of actually *causing* greatly accelerated cases of cancer. He must have stumbled across some sort of carcinogenic agent in his research into cancer and radiation. The man had to be a genius; he had cured Leiko of her radiation poisoning when that should have been impossible. But geniuses were sometimes the most dangerous men alive

If there was a way to cause such severe cases of cancer, there had to be a way to cure them as well. Shayne thought back to what Roberto had told him about the rites that converts to the cult went through, and he wondered if they were somehow exposed to the cancer-causing agent and then cured, and if that was the case, would they then be immune in the future? Shayne's mind was boggled by all the possibilities. This was like something out of a crazy spy movie, something a private eye wasn't really equipped to handle. But it wasn't a movie, and the people who had died would never be getting up again, and there was no super secret agent waiting around the corner to save the day with all kinds of gimmicky weapons.

What there was, was a beat-up, sick human being who happened to be hard-headed enough to keep plugging away, when he should have had the sense to lie down and die and let the rest of the world die with him. The rest of the world . . . and the woman he loved.

Mike Shayne crawled closer to the Temple of the Lotus.

There were no guards that he could see outside, nor any cameras trained on the area that surrounded the temple. The jungle came up to within a few yards of the thick stone walls, and Shayne was glad of the cover. He kept an eye out for trip wires and alarms of that sort, knowing all the while that he might be setting off pressure-sensitive alarms inside the temple.

When he reached the edge of the jungle, he came up in a crouch, took a deep breath, and sprinted for the temple. No opposition popped up as he ran, and seconds later, he was pressing the stone as he had seen the Black Lotus do on his first trip to this eerie place.

The door began to slide up.

Shayne darted back, knowing that if there were guards just inside, they might come rushing out to see what was happening. He brought

the .45 up, ready to fire.

No guards came out. He could see into the corridor within now, and it was empty.

A pang of fear shot through Shayne. Could they have abandoned the temple, moved the operation, whatever it was, somewhere else? No, there had been too much equipment in the temple, he realized. This was a permanent base; it had to be.

That left only one answer. It was a trap. They knew he was coming, which meant they knew about Eagle being dead.

He kept the pistol leveled and walked through the opening, into the corridor.

Shayne wasn't at all surprised when the massive door whined down behind him. He had been expecting that. A cold sense of fatality gripped him. It was a monstrous game, he realized, a trifle irrationally. The government agents, Doctor Podbillon, the grandiose scheme to rule the world . . . they were all just pawns in the game of life and death between the Black Lotus and Mike Shayne.

But one of those pawns was named Lucy, and Shayne's thoughts kept going back to her . . .

SO FAR, HE HAD SEEN NO ONE. The doors along the corridor were closed and locked. But suddenly the sound of chanting came to his ears, and he was able to pinpoint which of the branching corridors it was coming from. He walked down it boldly, and the light in his eyes was just a little bit insane.

There was a door in front of him, a heavy wooden door. He pushed it open — and the lights in the corridor behind him went off.

There was a dim glow coming from the room beyond the door. Shayne stepped into the opening, saw that the light was coming from banks of candles set around the huge room. It was a cavernous place, with a lofty ceiling and shadows filling the corners. The rhythmic pulse of the chanting filled the musty air, and Shayne knew he was in the main room of the temple, the place where the blood of human sacrifices had been spilled in centuries past. There were robed and hooded figures ranked around the room underneath the candles. Shayne was sure they were all armed, and he was outnumbered at least fifty to one.

But it was what was at the other end of the room that turned his blood to ice in his veins.

An altar, a huge block of marble, rose above the floor. The area around it was higher, too, a sort of dais. An enormous brazen gong stood beside the altar.

And so did the Black Lotus. Dressed in black, she held a whip in her hand, and she had never looked deadlier.

In front of her, suspended by cruel ropes was Lucy Hamilton. She started to cry out when she saw Shayne; he saw her mouth move in her terrified face, but no sound came to him over the drone of the chanting.

Leiko clapped her hands.

The chanting stopped. The Black Lotus said in a voice that was soft, yet rang and filled the room, "Welcome, Michael Shayne. I hoped that it would be you who returned, and not the one called Eagle. Thank you for disposing of him. He was becoming troublesome."

Shayne bit back a curse. She was ahead of him at every turn, getting him to do her dirty work for her. She had paused and seemed to be waiting for him to reply. He had nothing to say to her. She had grace, and timeless beauty, and as far as he was concerned, she was utterly, utterly mad.

He raised his gun, determined that she should die, no matter what the cost.

Something hit him in the back of the head, and he went down as the chanting began again. The pistol clattered away. Shayne tried to get back up, tried with every ounce of his strength.

And it wasn't enough. He went down, down and out . . .

X

AND WHEN HE CAME BACK UP AGAIN, IT WAS QUIET.

The absence of the chanting was the first thing that Shayne noticed, that and the pain in his head. As his senses came back to him, he realized that the wound in his back was bleeding again, but it didn't feel like much at the moment. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, or what had happened while he was out.

He forced his eyes open and found himself peering into shadows. His hands were tied behind him, tied to something that was holding him up. As he turned his head slowly, he saw that his bonds were wrapped around a stone pillar. It was set in the floor of the temple's main room, some ten feet from the altar.

Lucy was now tied to the altar, her head slumped limply to one side.

Shayne thought for a second that his worst fears had come true. But then he saw the slow, gentle rise and fall of her chest and knew that she was either drugged or had fainted. He heaved a sigh of relief.

"I hope you will pardon my theatrics earlier," the Black Lotus said from behind Shayne. She came into his view, wearing a long silken gown that showed off her trim figure. She went on, "It is sometimes

necessary to play to these natives' sense of the dramatic."

Shayne felt like raging and pulling on his bonds, but that wouldn't do any good. He forced himself to stay calm and asked, "You knew I would come back, didn't you?"

"Of course, Mike. I know how your mind works. If Eagle failed to kill you, as I suspected he might, you would come back here to try to rescue your lover."

Shayne wondered if that was just a hint of jealousy he heard in her voice. He said, "And if Eagle had managed to murder me?"

"Then he would have been killed when he returned to the temple. He still had power and influence over some of my people, from the old days when he was important in crime circles here. His usefulness to me was at an end, though."

"What now? Do you wipe out Lucy and me as casually as you would have Eagle?"

Leiko smiled and shook her head. "You have never understood the depth of my feeling for you, Mike. Even after all the trouble you have caused for me, after you have done things that would make me kill anyone else out of hand, you can still be a part of my plan. A part of my life, if you wish that." She glanced over at Lucy. "Of course, regrettable as it may be, this woman must die, whatever you decide."

Shayne's face twisted. "You'll have to kill us both," he snarled. "I don't want any part of you or your perverted plans."

Leiko's smile went away, and her eyes became cold and distant. "As you wish," she said softly. "But your deaths, pleasurable though they might be to me, will have to wait. I have more pressing matters to attend to tonight. Now that you have successfully eliminated the threat that the agents of your government posed to me, I can carry through with the first step on the road to destiny."

"And what's that?" Shayne asked. Despite his wounds and the odds against him, he hadn't given up hope of getting out of here in time to do something to stop her. If he gave up that hope . . . He took a firm grip on his nerves and told them to stop screaming.

"I see no harm in telling you now," Leiko said. "There is much to this temple that you have not seen, Mike. For example, in a silo in the basement is a missile. It will be launched tonight, in approximately half an hour. I should be getting down to the launch control, in fact."

Shayne was frowning, and he realized that he wanted to reach up and tug on his earlobe. The ropes around his arms stopped that gesture before it ever got started, though. "A missile?" he said. "You're going to take over the world with one missile?"

"A very special missile," the Black Lotus smiled. "With a very special payload." She started to go on, but Shayne interrupted her.

"The stuff that causes cancer!" he exclaimed. "The goddamned Podbillion Process!"

Leiko frowned just slightly. "You never cease to amaze me, Mike. Actually, the Podbillion Process is the curative process, but you're close enough. The carcinogenic agent isolated by Doctor Podbillion will be released in the upper atmosphere by the explosion of our missile. It's incredibly effective, and the world's prevailing winds should sweep it across the entire globe. Of course, the effects it causes will be diminished by the wide-spread nature of the attack, but still, the world will face a slow, agonizing death . . . unless every country relinquishes control to us."

SHAYNE TRIED NOT TO STARE AT HER. It was an absolutely incredible scheme, the kind of thing usually dreamed up in some Hollywood writer's imagination, but she was totally serious. And the horrifying thing was that, based on the evidence, she had the means to carry it out.

"Who will rule?" he asked. "You and Podbillion?"

She shook her head. "Not Podbillion. He is important, yes, but obviously not fit to rule. The man is too idealistic about his aims, even if he was eager to use my means to further them, once I found out what he was capable of. No, the world will be ruled by myself and one other, the man closest to me, the man who provided the money to make this temple our headquarters. This island is the perfect place, geographically speaking, to launch the missile, you know."

"But the other man?" Shayne prodded.

She gave him a strange look. "For many years, I thought he was dead. Now we have found one another again. I am speaking, Mike, of my grandfather, who in his day led the greatest criminal organization in the world!" Her voice became husky with the powerful emotions cursing through her. "But now it is *my* day. Or should I say my night? The night of the Black Lotus!"

Shayne was silent for a moment after her exultant words rang through the main room of the temple. Then he asked, "And if the world does turn itself over to you?"

"Then the secrets of the Podbillion Process will be made known, and cures can begin. But by the time the threat is over, our power will be solidified, and no one will be strong enough to dislodge us. Now, I must go and attend to that first step." She turned on her heel and took two steps into the shadows, then stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "I will be back to attend to you and your woman later, and believe me when I say I will regret it."

She disappeared into the gloomy reaches of the big room, and Shayne finally let his head sag forward wearily. He felt like he was caught in the worst nightmare of his life, and there was no waking up from this one, in a cold sweat or not. For a few moments, he rested, taking deep breaths and looking around the room for something, anything, that would help him to escape.

There was nothing there, though, nothing but bare stone and Lucy, who was as pale as death as she breathed shallowly.

A sudden scuff of footsteps in the shadows made Shayne jerk his head up. Out of the dimness came a figure in a lab coat, and the big redhead realized in surprise that it was Podbillon.

"Hello, Mr. Shayne," he said softly. "I hope you're not in too much pain. I am still a doctor, you know; I hate to see people suffering."

"You've got a damn funny way of showing it," Shayne growled.

"Oh, but you see, it's to end suffering that I agreed to help Leiko. All the petty squabbling between nations must go, don't you see? Then there will be no more wars. Under the new rule, there will be nothing to fight about."

"And the power you'd have doesn't have anything to do with it, does it?" Shayne asked sharply.

Podbillon smiled slyly. "Power helps." He thrust his hands in the pockets of his coat and went on, "I'm here to ask a favor of you, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne goggled at him. "You really are as crazy as she is, Pod-billon."

The man's popping eyes fixed on Shayne intently. "Not really. That's why I want you to kill her."

Again Shayne had to stare. "I thought the two of you were partners."

"Dear Leiko is a fanatic, Mr. Shayne. She and her mysterious relative she keeps referring to might well decide that they could do without me once they achieve their goal."

A laugh forced itself from Shayne's dry lips. "You're a better judge of character than I thought, doc. She just told me not ten minutes ago that you weren't fit to rule with her and that you would be taken care of later."

Podbillon's mouth tightened, and one hand emerged from his coat holding a pistol. "Normally, I might think you were trying to trick me, Shayne, but knowing Leiko as I am starting to, I can only believe you." His other hand came out of the coat, with a knife in it that gleamed in the light from the few burning candles. He stepped up to Shayne.

And started cutting the ropes that held him.

AS SHAYNE'S ARMS CAME FREE, PODBILLION PRESSED THE gun into his hand. "It's fully loaded," the doctor said. "The chances are that you're going to die whatever any of us do, but at least this way you can take Leiko with you and assure the world that it won't have to feel the iron heel of her rule. That's worth dying for, isn't it?"

"It's worth living for," Shayne grunted, snatching the knife away from Podbillion with his other hand, even though the fingers were still tingling with returned circulation, and hurrying over to the altar."

"Please, Mr. Shayne," Podbillion said as Shayne began to saw at the ropes holding Lucy. "There's no time for —"

The crack of a rifle cut him off.

Podbillion jerked forward, crying out and clutching at his side. As he slumped to the stone floor, Shayne whirled around and saw the blood forming a stain on the white lab coat.

A guard stood on the other side of the room, holding a rifle. Shayne dove for the cover of the pillar as the man fired again.

Dust and splinters of stone stung Shayne's face as he landed heavily. He hadn't had time to check the gun that Podbillion had given him. All he could do was jerk it up and start squeezing the trigger.

It blasted in his hand, the slugs catching the guard in the middle and folding him up with a scream.

Shayne was on his feet in an instant, racing back to the altar and slashing at the bonds now. Lucy was starting to come out of her stupor, shaking her head and looking confused. Shayne tore the last ropes away from her, stuck the gun and knife behind his belt, and scooped her up in his arms.

She looked up at him with eyes that showed dilated pupils from the drug she had been given. She murmured, "Michael . . . What . . . what's wrong? What's happening?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, Angel," Shayne replied, his voice oddly gentle under the circumstances. "We've just got to get out of here, that's all."

Carrying her, he trotted across the room to where the guard lay dead and stopped to pick up the man's rifle awkwardly. As he did, he glanced back to where Podbillion lay, beside the altar. The doctor was propped up on one elbow, looking down at the blood on his coat, and Shayne heard him say in a near-whisper, "It's not fair." The cavernous room carried the words plainly to Shayne.

And then Podbillion slumped, his head coming to rest against the hard stone of the altar. He would never be getting up again. The Podbillion Process would do him no good.

"Hold it! You move and I'll blow you away, you bastard!"

Shayne's eyes were all that moved. Another guard had appeared in the corridor leading away from the altar room, and this one held an automatic rifle trained on Shayne. He looked nervous, and that was bad. His finger was tight on the trigger

Two clubbed brown hands came out of the shadows and smashed into the back of the guard's neck.

The man fell forward, involuntarily squeezing off a burst into the floor. Shayne used the butt of the rifle he held to make sure he would not be waking up any time soon, then looked up into Roberto's grinning face.

"A man cannot be cautious all his life," the native said. "I saw how you got in, and after thinking about it for a long while, decided to come in after you. I hope you are not angry, *Senor Shayne*."

Shayne would have laughed if he had had the energy. Instead, he just smiled and set Lucy down carefully. She was conscious enough now to stand on her own, though she was still in a daze and didn't seem to have any idea what was going on.

"Thank you, friend," Shayne said simply. "You have done another good thing for me. Now I must ask you for yet another favor." He held the rifle out to Roberto, then picked up the automatic weapon.

"What is it you wish me to do?"

"You know the way back out of here?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"Then get this girl out of here, fast, and take her back to your village. Protect her until I come for her. All right?"

Roberto nodded solemnly. "And what of you, *Senor Shayne*?"

Shayne's grin became the look of a wild beast as it turns on the thing that has cornered it. "I'm going to stop the evil that lives here from moving out into the rest of the world."

Roberto put an arm around Lucy to help support her. His dark eyes locked with Shayne's, and he said, "Go with God, then. You will need Him beside you."

SHAYNE WAITED UNTIL ROBERTO AND LUCY HAD SLIPPED away down a corridor, then went in the other direction, not taking any pains to avoid noise. There were bound to be guards around, drawn by the gunfire, and he wanted them following him.

Leiko had said something about going down to the launch control, and she had specifically said that the missile silo was in the basement of the temple. A section of the roof would be rigged to slide back and create an opening for the missile, Shayne knew. Now he had to find some stairs that would take him down to that part of the operation.

Uniforms popped up in front of him. He snapped the rifle up instinctively and fired a burst, scattering the guards. While they were shouting for assistance, he was sprinting down another corridor.

There would be less than fifteen minutes until the launch now, Shayne figured. He had to find what he was looking for soon

Bullets screamed past him. There were guards behind him, and as he leaped toward the wall, another group appeared at the other end of the corridor. They had him in a crossfire. But there was a door a few feet away, to his left, and he lunged toward it, hitting it and knocking it open.

He went through it blindly and felt emptiness under his feet.

He fell, slamming into the flight of stone stairs that led downward, rolling over and over in darkness. When he hit the bottom, his breath was gone and his left arm was hanging, useless at his side. It could well be broken, he knew, but he didn't have time to feel the pain. There was light ahead of him, and he came up onto his feet, still holding the rifle, and staggered toward it.

The hallway ended in a brightly-lit room. Shayne saw flashing lights, computer consoles, video monitors, and lots of people in white coats. Technicians — the launch crew. And in their midst, a speck of color

A lovely young woman in a bright silk dress.

There were guards here, too, and one of them called to the technos, "Look out!" They hit the floor, even as the guards opened fire.

Shayne was holding the trigger on his rifle down, making the weapon buck in his hand as it spewed a torrent of lead. He saw Leiko's mouth moving as she screamed something at him, but no sound could be heard over the thunder of gunfire. Shayne didn't know what force was protecting him, but he saw the guards tumble lifelessly under his withering fire, saw the monitors blossom in a shower of exploding vacuum tubes. His bullets ripped into the computers. Sparks shot into the air. It was a beautiful fireworks display of death.

And then the gun fell silent. The fireworks were over.

THE BLACK LOTUS MOANED.

She was still on her feet, staring at Shayne, miraculously untouched by the holocaust, as was he. The technicians were still hugging the floor, and Shayne didn't think any of them had been hurt.

Leiko tore her eyes away from Shayne and stared at the ruined machinery. A terrible cry tore itself out of her, as she looked at the destruction of her dream, but then a sudden light sprang up in her eyes.

"You have not stopped me!" she hissed at Shayne. "I can still launch the missile manually!"

Before Shayne could say anything, she had turned and was running toward a short flight of steps that led up to a balcony. On the balcony was a booth with thick steel walls, and Shayne guessed that it contained apparatus for firing the missile in case of emergency. He threw down the empty rifle and called after Leiko, "Stop! It's over, Leiko!"

She paid no attention to him as she ran toward the stairs, stepping on the dead bodies of her guards on the way. Shayne saw several members of the Lotus cult among them, the robes and hoods torn by bullets now.

Shayne started to run after her. Every step was a living hell, as agony washed through him from his head, his back and his arm. He knew he might pass out at any second.

A gauge on one of the instrument panels caught his eye as he passed it, and he stopped to look at it. It hadn't been hit by his gunfire, and it looked like it was still functioning. The needle on it was all the way over in the red danger zone.

Shayne stooped and grabbed the collar of one of the terrified technos, jerking the man to his feet. Thrusting him at the gauge, Shayne barked, "What's that mean?"

"Th-there must be a fire," the man stammered. "It's heating up the extra missile fuel that's stored down here. If it gets much hotter, it'll explode!"

Shayne swept his gaze over the white-coated group and bellowed, "You heard the man! Get the hell out of here! Get everybody else out! Move!"

Leiko was halfway up to the manual control booth now. Shayne started after her again, ignoring the panic-stricken exodus of the technos. She entered the booth through a heavy steel door as Shayne reached the bottom of the stairs.

He didn't know how long they had before the whole place went up with a bang, but right now he had to worry about stopping her from launching the missile.

Even taking the stairs two and three at a time and sending fresh spurts of pain through his body, he was too late.

AS HE REACHED THE DOOR OF THE BOOTH, Leiko looked up triumphantly from the row of switches she was throwing. She laughed. "It's done!" she cried. Shayne felt an ominous rumble under his feet.

"This place is going to blow up, Leiko," he said quietly. "Let's go."

"You fool!" She was terrifyingly beautiful, and Shayne realized for the first time how much of her beauty came from the evil inside her. "The world is mine now! You and everyone else in this miserable world are insects now, compared to me!"

"Podbillion's dead," Shayne told her. "I hope you know how to work his process. But it doesn't really matter, does it? We won't be getting out of here, and the rest of the world will die, too."

He wanted to throw himself at her and choke the life from her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He hoped Lucy and Roberto were well away from the temple by now.

Leiko screamed.

Shayne looked up from his momentary reverie, saw that she was gazing in horror at a radar screen. He could see the blip on it, knew instinctively that it was the missile, being tracked by the radar that had been installed along with all the other modern equipment in the temple. He stepped closer, a strange tight feeling in his chest.

The blip was going right into the Atlantic.

"The guidance system!" Leiko cried. "It's not working! You ruined it! You've ruined it all! I have to detonate it now!"

Shayne didn't think he was capable of moving so fast. But he was beside her, jerking her away from the controls and throwing her to the other side of the booth.

The world had a glimmer of a chance now. If the missile went into the ocean, undetonated, it could be recovered carefully and the threat ended. More than that, research into the cancer-causing agent it carried might be the last link needed to end the threat for everyone it struck down in the natural course of things.

And if the world was going to live, then Shayne had something to live for.

He grabbed Leiko again. She was raging and spitting, and he did the only thing he could. He hit her, as hard as he could.

She gasped, her eyes rolling up in her head, and fell toward him. Shayne caught her, slung her over his good shoulder, and ran down the stairs. He lurched across the devastated control room, deserted now except for the dead, and found the stairs that led up into the temple again.

The fleeing technicians must have spread the word effectively. Shayne encountered no one alive as he ran through the temple, carrying Leiko. He reached the hallway that led outside, saw the the huge stone door was gaping open.

Leiko came awake with a strangled cry and hit him in the head.

Shayne let her go, dropping to his knees groggily. He had forgotten

just how strong she was, how expert she was at the martial arts. As he shook his head and staggered back to his feet, she shrieked at him, "It's all your fault! You wouldn't love me, and now you've ruined everything! My grandfather will never forgive me!"

He saw her take a step toward him, poised to attack, and he knew he was too weak to defend himself now. But then she stopped, her eyes full of insane light, and whirled and started running back toward the interior of the temple.

"Dammit, Leiko, come back!" Shayne shouted after her, but she ignored him, plunging deeper into the Temple of the Lotus.

Shayne looked after her for seconds that seemed like eternities, then turned and ran for the opening to the outside.

He plunged out into the night air, breathing deeply of the warm, muggy stuff, and kept running for the jungle. Surely the time would be gone soon, and the missile fuel would reach the point where it could do nothing else but explode.

Shayne ran and ran, brush whipping at his face, and then he was flying suddenly, his feet no longer touching the ground. He thought that was funny, and then the blast and the heat hit him, pounding him mercilessly, flinging him forward beyond all control.

Shayne kept flying. But it wasn't funny anymore . . .

XI

"SO THAT'S HOW YOU LANDED IN THE HOSPITAL," the man named Jasper said to Shayne several days later. "Roberto found you in the jungle, and brought you back to Malogrado. My men and I were there by then. You couldn't miss that explosion. The tourists thought it was great. They want to know when the next one is scheduled."

"Never, I hope," Shayne grunted.

He was lying in the hospital bed, his back and head bandaged and his left arm in a cast. He had been awake for only a few hours, after having been unconscious all during the several days since the explosion at the temple. Since waking up, he had been examined by every doctor on San Marigal, including some flown in from the mainland, and the general consensus was that he would live . . . and that he was the luckiest son of a bitch ever to draw breath.

He had also seen Lucy, who had recovered from her ordeal in fine shape and good spirits, and Tim Rourke, who was covering the story for his paper, and Chief Will Gentry, who had left the Miami police force in the capable hands of his subordinates and flown to San Marigal to see his old friend.

Jasper stood up from his chair and said, "I'd better get going. There's still a lot of work to do on this case, what with recovering that missile and cleaning up the remains of that Lotus cult. I guess we can muddle along without you for that, though, especially since you already did the hard part."

"And I'm not even one of your damned secret agents," Shayne growled. "I am glad the missile didn't explode."

"You and everyone else who knows about it," Jasper agreed. "Evidently Podbillon didn't leave behind any notes, and all of his equipment was destroyed in the blast. We think his process was some sort of combination of radiation and chemotherapy that regular researchers haven't hit on yet. The man could have done a lot of good, if he hadn't become twisted."

"And even more harm," Shayne added. "Well, maybe, once the stuff from the missile is recovered . . ."

"Yes. We can hope so."

Jasper smiled at Shayne and went to the door, then paused and looked back. "There's one thing I haven't told you, Shayne. We've been all through the ruins of the temple —"

"And you didn't find the Black Lotus's body," Shayne finished for him.

Jasper looked surprised. "That's right. How did you know?"

Shayne just smiled. "Some things you just know, without being told. I'm afraid it may not be over with her."

Jasper shook his head. "We've just overlooked her body. We'll find it, I'm sure. I'm sure we'll find it. I'm sure." He went out muttering those words.

And Shayne kept smiling. It was a grim smile. ●

And On The Late Show

4 AM **5** MOVIE — Mystery **BW**

"Larceny in Her Heart." (1946) Mike Shayne (Hugh Beaumont) has troubles with a disappearing body. Phyllis: Cheryl Walker. Rafferty: Ralph Dunn. Tim: Paul Bryar. Patterson: Douglas Fowley. (90 min.)

Lights flickered into brilliance, blinding Lansing for a moment. 'Is this what you're looking for, Major?' a voice asked. A moment later, the other man squeezed the trigger of his weapon, and projectiles struck Lansing in the chest!

Deadly Medicine

by W. L. FIELDHOUSE

CAPTAIN DAVID CLAXTON WISHED HE HADN'T COME TO THE Doctor's Ball. It was one of those things that can make being an officer in the United States Army a pain in the posterior. He hated to wear his dress blue uniform, designed in the old cavalry style. Claxton felt foolish — a grown man all dressed up to play cowboys and Indians. The uniform jacket of his dress blues was too tight around the enlarged girth at his waist. The damn cavalry outfit only reminded Claxton he was getting older and fatter and hadn't received a promotion in years.

Although only thirty-one, Capt. Claxton appeared to be ten years older. His face was shopworn and his body had become flabby since medical school and enlistment into the armed forces. Of course he'd gotten a commission. The military always needs qualified medical personnel, and an army doctor is one of the few officers that isn't expected to exercise any leadership qualities.

However, the *M★A★S★H* image of an army doctor was a gross distortion of the truth. Claxton hated the TV series. Military MDs were presented as half clown and half saint, always bucking the system and hating the armed forces and war. In reality, an army doctor works with the service and generally finds it agreeable to his needs. A good medical man is never a buffoon and the best fall short of sainthood. Any sane man — including the colonels and generals depicted as war-loving villains in fiction — wants peace, but not at *any* price.

Of course, Della loved parties and balls. Claxton's wife was a sleek beauty, six years his junior, with shoulder-length blonde hair and a flawlessly lovely face. She liked displaying her magnificent figure in skin-tight evening gowns with plunging necklines. Men would stare at her with open admiration and poorly concealed lust. She enjoyed their attention. Claxton hated it and Della relished his jealous misery as well.

THE DOCTOR'S BALL WAS A MORALE BOOSTING AFFAIR conducted by the staff of the USAEUR Hospital in Nuremberg. Funds for the party were acquired by contributions from Army medical personnel stationed in West Germany, so the taxpayers (including fellow military members) had no reason to complain. They held the celebration in the ballroom of the Gesund Hotel in downtown Nuremberg.

The hotel eagerly agreed to play host to the Americans and offered discounts on everything from appetizers to rooms. Captain Claxton was grateful for the inexpensive liquor as he consumed martini after martini, trying to drown his discomfort and humiliation while subjected to a cavalry costume and an exhibitionist spouse. The congregation was predominantly male, with a small percentage of wives and female army personnel. Half the men at the party flocked to dance with Della Claxton. She moved gracefully across the floor, tripping the light fantastic to whatever music the multi-talented band supplied. Her strapless/backless black gown seemed to cling to her body like a layer of paint. The all-but-non-existent front offered a generous view of cleavage. A slit up the middle of her skirt seemed to extend forever. Della frequently pulled back the cloth like the flap of a tent to display a lot of nylon-encased leg.

"How's it feel to have such a sexy wife?" a young doctor, a dispensary jockey from Kirby Barracks, asked.

"It feels like everybody else uses your toothbrush," Claxton replied flatly as he helped himself to another martini.

The party continued for several hours. Doctor Claxton kept drinking, and Della remained the center of masculine attention. Colonel Hugh Masters, the host of the Doctors' Ball and one of the top staff officers of the Nuremberg Hospital, stepped onto the stage. As he moved to the microphone, the Colonel reminded Claxton of Brian Donlevy playing the role of a crusty old cavalry commander on the late show.

"The band is going to take a break now," Masters announced. "But the bar is still open, so I imagine you'll be able to entertain yourselves for a while."

Polite laughter responded to the colonel's joke.

"I'd like to say that I'm pleased with the number of medical men and women, the hardest working people in our armed forces, who managed to attend tonight's celebration," Masters smiled. "No, I'm not going to make a speech — yet. Just enjoy yourselves. You've earned it."

Applause greeted his remarks. As the colonel stepped down, the bulk of the party moved toward the bar as the man behind it began drawing beer from the tap and preparing glasses for various mixed drinks. Claxton was already there.

Della joined them, arm in arm with First Lieutenant Vincent Carlton, a young doctor with wavy blond hair and handsome Nordic features. *They look good together*, Claxton thought miserably. She whispered something to Carlton. He shrugged, then placed his hands on her narrow waist and picked Della up and put her on the long wooden counter. Della smiled slyly as she crossed her long legs. She made no attempt to pull her split skirt over her well-revealed thighs.

"I have an announcement," Della Claxton declared, raising her voice to a near-shout. "Everybody listen 'cause this is important!"

The crowd fell silent. "You all know my husband, the great Doctor Claxton," she gestured toward her spouse. "Well, did you know he might finally make major after all these years?"

Numerous voices congratulated Claxton, but he ignored them as he slammed down his drink and glared at Della. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm telling everyone about the only thing that matters to you," she replied. "The only thing you're any good at except hitting the old bottle."

She hopped down from her perch. "You're certainly not any good in the bedroom," she crooned.

"Della!" he snarled.

"Now, I know a couple of fellas that could teach you a thing or two on that subject," she turned to Lt. Carlton. "Right, Vince?"

THE YOUNG DOCTOR STARED AT HER with an expression of astonishment. He seemed unable to believe she would be so bold in front of her husband and a roomful of high-ranking officers. Carlton turned and discreetly shouldered his way through the crowd.

"And then there's Craig Marsh and stately old Neil Becker," Della continued. "There's still a lot of fire in that oh-so-proper major."

"That's enough, Della," her husband warned as he slid off his barstool.

"But I haven't announced the winner yet"

Claxton's open palm struck her cheek hard. With a yelp of pain, Della's head snapped to one side from the force of the blow. She placed a hand to her face and glared at him.

"You bastard," she snarled.

Suddenly, Della lunged forward and raised a bent knee forcibly between Claxton's legs. He rasped in agony as his crotch seemed to explode. The doctor crumbled to his knees as Della quickly slipped among the onlookers and headed for the exit. Claxton climbed to his feet.

"This has gone far enough, Captain," Colonel Masters declared, stepping in front of Claxton.

"I'm gonna kill her!" Claxton growled, dodging past the Colonel as he stumbled after his wife.

RUNNING AWKWARDLY, HE ENTERED THE HOTEL LOBBY. Della's fleeing figure mounted the stairwell. Claxton shuffled forward, but the desk clerk barred his way.

"*Was ist los?*" the clerk asked.

The enraged doctor pushed the man aside, nearly knocking him to the floor. Climbing the stairs, Claxton bellowed his wife's name as she dashed down the corridor, pulled open a door and moved inside. Colonel Masters and several other men from the party entered the lobby to see Claxton disappear from the head of the stairs.

"Call the MPs," Masters told Lieutenant Higgins. "No, call the CID instead. They tend to be more tactful and they're less obvious. The rest of us will stop Captain Claxton before he does something—"

A woman's scream interrupted the colonel's sentence and motivated the men into a desperate race up the stairwell. "The Claxtons' room is number twenty-two," Masters called out.

Several younger officers located the door with '22' tacked on its top panel. They heard no screams, angry voices or sounds of a struggle. A lieutenant tried the door and discovered it was locked. Captain Kilpatrick, a husky veteran of two hitches in Vietnam, told the others to step aside, then charged into the door like a bull, his shoulder snapping the lock on impact. They entered the room and froze abruptly.

Captain David Claxton stood unsteadily, his eyes wide and glassy as he stared down at his wife. Della lay at his feet, her body motionless — a curtain cord wound around her slender neck.

Colonel Masters shook his head sadly and walked to the front desk. Lieutenant Higgins hung up the phone. "Did you tell the Criminal

Investigative Department it's a homicide, not just a domestic quarrel?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Higgins nodded woodenly. "They're sending Major Lansing," the young officer said almost reverently.

THE TALL, LEAN MAJOR — CLAD IN HIS CLASS A DRESS greens — stood out among the blue uniformed members of the ill-fated party like an astronaut at a caveman convention. The other officers stepped respectfully aside as he entered the hotel lobby. Colonel Masters approached him and briefly exchanged salutes.

"Major Lansing?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the other officer replied, removing his service cap to reveal neatly trimmed brown hair, laced at the temples with gray.

"You have quite a reputation, Major," Masters said. "Your remarkable record of solving the most complex and baffling homicides has made you something of a legend in USAEUR. The military needs a few heroes these days."

"Thank you, Colonel," Lansing smiled, slightly embarrassed by the unexpected praise. "Is the body upstairs?"

"That's right," Masters answered, leading Lansing up the steps. "The officers who broke in the door and saw Captain Claxton standing over his wife are in their rooms waiting for you to interview them."

"Their rooms?" Lansing raised an eyebrow with surprise.

"The Doctors' Ball was to be an all-night celebration with a special brunch in the morning. Everyone purchased a hotel room for the night."

"I see," the major nodded. "What about the suspect?"

"Captain Claxton? Well, the MPs arrived first and we put him in custody. However, when we told them you were coming, they decided to hold Claxton here until you could talk to him personally."

"Very good," Lansing said as they reached the head of the stairs.

LANSING AND MASTERS ENTERED ROOM TWENTY-TWO. Della Claxton remained sprawled on the floor, the cord still draped around her neck. The CID investigator knelt by the corpse and frowned.

"Strangulation," he muttered. "Garrote-style with a right-hand twist. Whoever did it handled that rope pretty well. The victim was probably dead within a matter of seconds."

"Claxton and his wife quarreled violently," the Colonel explained. "They actually came to blows. He threatened to kill her before chasing Della up here."

"Another open and shut case," Lansing commented dryly.

"That's about the size of it, Major," Masters agreed.

"I've had two such cases recently," the investigator remarked as he walked to a door behind the corpse. "Neither one proved to be open or shut."

"If Claxton didn't kill his wife, who did?"

Lansing opened the door to find a small, but clean bathroom. "I didn't say Claxton didn't do it," he told the Colonel. "But I'm not prepared to say he's guilty either."

The Major moved to a window above the bathtub. As he gently pushed it, the window swung open. "That's interesting," he said. "It isn't latched."

"Do you think someone may have entered through the window?" Masters asked with astonishment.

"It's possible," the major said, standing on the rim of the tub to peer outside. The window led to a ledge, two feet wide, that extended across the width of the building. "This side of the hotel faces a brick wall. Unless someone happened to be in the alley below, no one would have noticed a person moving from one window to another."

"But, Major," Masters insisted. "I really don't see how anyone could have gotten into this room and killed Della Claxton except for her husband. He was really quite irrational and angry enough to kill."

Lansing stepped down from the tub. "Perhaps I should talk to the Captain now."

CAPTAIN DAVID CLAXTON SAT AT A LONG WALNUT TABLE in a conference room in the hotel. He occasionally glanced at the single window with longing, but two military policemen discouraged him from making any rash moves for freedom. One MP stood by the only door, his hand resting on the holstered pistol on his hip. The other cop guarded the window. With a token knock, Major Lansing entered the room. The military policemen and Claxton came to attention.

"At ease," the Major said. "I'm Clifford Lansing, CID. I'd like to speak with the Captain alone for a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," the senior MP replied.

The cops marched out of the conference room as Lansing pulled out a chair at the head of the table. "Have a seat, Captain."

"I'd rather stand, sir," Claxton said. "I suppose you want my confession now."

"I'd like to hear what happened tonight."

"Didn't anyone tell you how my wife was bragging about all the men she'd been going to bed with?" Claxton asked bitterly. "I'm sure they enjoyed recalling our fight in the ballroom and how I ran after Della

and threatened to kill her."

"Did you kill her?" Lansing inquired flatly.

"No!" the doctor exclaimed, gripping the backrest of a chair. "But who's going to believe me?"

"Tell me exactly what happened to you."

"I chased Della upstairs. She pulled open the door and ran inside. I followed her. I went into that room ready to beat the hell out of her, I admit that, but I wasn't going to kill her." His voice quavered. "Despite everything, I still loved her."

"Then what?" Lansing asked patiently.

"As soon as I got into the room and slammed the door, I felt a sharp pain near the small of my back, like someone rammed a needle into me," he wiped his moist eyes with the back of his hand. "I don't expect you to believe this, but I had some sort of convulsion. I fell to the floor, completely unable to coordinate my muscles as a wave of pain came over me. I heard Della scream, but I couldn't even lift my head to see what happened. I think someone else was in the room — there must have been, because when I got to my feet I found Della . . ." He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, God! This is a nightmare!"

"Would anyone else have a reason to kill your wife?" Lansing inquired, resisting an urge to feel sympathy for Claxton. If he was telling the truth, the Captain had indeed suffered a nerve-racking experience. If he was lying, he was an excellent actor and probably very cunning and dangerous.

"Maybe the guys she was . . . involved with," Claxton answered, leaning on the backrest of the chair. "Lieutenant Carlton was the only one at the party. She also mentioned Craig, that would be Captain Marsh over at the Fourth MP battalion, and Major Neil Becker in the toxicology department of the USAEUR hospital here in Nuremberg."

"All these men are doctors?"

"Della had a thing for medical men in uniform."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"There's only one thing left," Claxton muttered, suddenly raising the chair and swinging it overhead.

LANSING THREW HIMSELF TO THE FLOOR as the furniture hurtled across the table. Wood cracked against wood as the projectile struck the backrest of Lansing's seat, toppling both chairs to the floor. Claxton rushed forward before Lansing could rise, swinging the heel of his shoe at the mastoid behind the Major's right ear. Lansing's forearm met the descending ankle, checking the kick. Pivoting on the

small of his back, Lansing's left leg lashed out, the bottom of his foot shoving forcibly under the Captain's thigh to hurl him off balance.

Moving with surprising agility for a bulky man, Claxton fell into a backward roll and sprang to his feet as the Major rose. The Captain assumed a karate *T-dachi* stance, one hand extended and the other balled in a *seiken* fist at his hip. Lansing moved into a cat stance, poised on the balls of his feet, his fingers arched like claws.

With a *kiya* shout, Claxton attacked. He feinted with rapid hand gestures twice, then threw a powerful ram's head punch at Lansing's solar plexus. The CID investigator slapped a palm against the outside of the aggressor's arm, spinning Claxton around as he stepped behind the doctor and tried to employ a half-nelson/hammer-lock combination to subdue him.

Claxton raised a foot and thrust it into the nearest wall. Pushing hard, he sent himself and Lansing hurtling backward to tumble awkwardly over the width of the table. Both men crashed to the floor and staggered upright. The Captain's left fist delivered a punishing blow to Lansing's jaw, knocking him three feet. Claxton whirled a hook kick at the Major's mid-section. The sides of Lansing's hands struck like twin axe-blades, the *shuto* strokes connecting with the attacking leg's shin. He counter-attacked with a side-kick to Claxton's lower abdomen. The Captain doubled up with a gasp as Lansing executed a *uraken* backfist to his opponent's face. Claxton fell onto the conference table, slid half its length and collapsed to the floor heavily.

The door opened and the MPs entered, their .45 Colt pistols held ready. Doctor David Claxton lay on his back, panting hard as a trickle of blood oozed from the corner of his mouth. Lansing dusted off his uniform sleeves and clucked his tongue with disgust.

"And how far did you think you would have gotten, Captain?" he asked.

MAJOR CONGLOSE ROLLED HIS EYES TOWARD THE CEILING and raised his hands with dismay. "What do you mean, the case isn't closed?" he demanded. "What more proof do you need? Claxton even attacked you to try to escape, for crissake!"

Lansing sat behind his desk in his office at CID headquarters. He leaned back in his chair and interlaced his fingers to make a cradle for the back of his head. "That doesn't mean Claxton's guilty. It only proves he's certain he'll be *found* guilty, and that isn't necessarily the same thing."

Conglose paced the floor with frustration. A short, moonfaced man with a well-receded hairline and close set eyes that squinted in protest

of his failure to wear the glasses he sorely needed because he felt they robbed him of his masculinity. "That's absurd, Lansing," he insisted.

"Is it?" the homicide investigator asked. "Do you remember that incident at Bradford Barracks? Everybody was certain Sanchez killed Tracy Collins, but the investigation proved otherwise. Then there was the recent murder case I had up at the Frankfort Zoo . . ."

"All right, Lansing," Conglose said sharply. "I'll mention it before you get a chance to gloat over it. I know this Claxton case has some similarities to what happened to my wife around Christmastime, but it's not the same thing."

"There are some noteworthy differences," Lansing acknowledged. "Witnesses saw Claxton fight with his wife, even he admits he threatened to kill her, and less than a minute passed between the time that Claxton chased Della upstairs and Captain Kilpatrick broke in the door."

"Then why do you even consider that Claxton might be innocent?" Conglose inquired. "After all, the odds that someone used that window are pretty slim."

"It's still possible. What interests me is Claxton's story about going into a convulsion."

Conglose clucked his tongue. "You've got his two-o-one file from the personnel records at Ansbach. Claxton has no history of epilepsy or similar ailments."

"Exactly," Lansing agreed. "Claxton could have rammed his head into a wall to get a convincing lump and claimed someone struck him when he entered the room. The convulsion story seems an unlikely alibi, so why fabricate such a tale?"

"Maybe that's why he made it up."

"Perhaps," Lansing allowed. "But why didn't he say it was caused by a splitting headache or a chest pain? He said it felt like someone stuck him with a needle at the small of his back."

"Did our people give him a medical examination?"

"Yes," Lansing sighed. "They said there was no evidence of a syringe injection anywhere on Claxton's body. I'm having a blood sample tested now."

"And you still think there's enough reason to keep this case open?"

"Yes, sir," Lansing confirmed. "I do."

"General Clayton will probably back you up again . . . as usual," Conglose said, obviously still resenting Lansing's good rapport with their commanding officer. "Where's Davis?" he added, noticing a vacant desk in Lansing's office.

"Wendy's on leave," Lansing answered. Specialist Fifth Class

Wendy Davis was his personal secretary, a lovely woman and a capable, reliable worker. "She'll be stateside for the next thirty days."

"Well, there's evidence of another heroin operation in USAEUR," Conglose said. "I'll be too busy with my own narcotics investigation to concern myself with your case."

Lansing resisted an urge to shout *hallelujah*. Major Conglose occasionally butted into homicide investigations, complicating Lansing's job. "Another dope ring?" Lansing frowned. "You busted three American GIs for a large heroin racket back in June 1980, as I recall."

"Yes," Conglose answered sourly. "A few weeks after you solved that murder in Einhorndorf and uncovered another heroin operation in the process."

"You've always said I was lucky," Lansing shrugged. "But there's really been an alarming increase of drug related problems throughout the armed forces over the last ten years."

"It's all these pot-smoking kids we've been getting," Conglose snorted.

"I don't think it's as simple as that," Lansing said.

"Spare me your theories, Lansing," Conglose muttered. "I'm assigned to narcotics and blackmarket."

"I seem to recall that, sir," Lansing said dryly.

"Speaking of investigations," Conglose said, "since you aren't ready to close your case, what will you do now?"

"Ask a few questions."

"And then?"

"That will depend on the answers."

LANSING DROVE TO THE ARMY HOSPITAL in Nuremberg that morning, parking his little white Volkswagen in the visitors' zone. He entered the elaborate maze of corridors and rooms that comprise one of the largest medical centers in USAEUR. After considerable effort to find proper directions, Lansing located the bio-chemical section and the toxicology laboratory. He recognized Major Neil Becker from a photograph in his 201 file. A broad-shouldered man with iron-gray hair and a strong lantern jaw, Becker sat by a plexiglass and steel table, his attention locked on a minute substance under a microscope.

"Doctor Becker?" Lansing inquired.

"Is this important?" the other man asked, his eyes still glued to his microscope. "I'm very busy."

"A murder investigation is important, Doctor."

Becker looked up sharply. "You must be talking about Della Clax-

ton," he said. "What are you? CID?"

"That's right," Lansing confirmed.

"Claxton killed her," the doctor said, putting on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. "What's there to investigate?"

"He says he didn't do it."

Becker chuckled without mirth. "How many murderers admit to their crimes, Major?"

"When they kill in the heat of passion and get caught redhanded, most of them do."

"What does this have to do with me?" Becker stood up. He was nearly as tall as Lansing.

"You knew Mrs. Claxton," the CID investigator replied. "She mentioned you at the Doctors' Ball last night. She said you were one of her lovers."

"That bitch," Becker muttered. "She just had to drag it up again."

"Then you did have an affair with her?"

The doctor nodded grimly. "It was almost six months ago. She fascinated me, lured me into the relationship. Della was a very desirable woman, there's no denying that. Unfortunately, the terms 'deceitful', 'calculating' and 'corrupt' also apply to her."

"And how did she display the darker side of her personality to you?"

"By a little blackmail scheme," Becker said. "She threatened to tell my wife about our involvement. You know what the Uniform Code of Military Justice states concerning adultery? It's a court-martial offense. Della could have ruined my marriage *and* my career with one fell swoop."

"What did you do about it?"

"There wasn't much I could do," the doctor sighed. "I agreed to her terms. Della demanded one-thousand dollars, which I withdrew from my savings account."

"You should never have given in," Lansing told him. "No black-mailer ever stops with one time."

"That's the worse part," Becker continued. "She laughed at me and literally threw the money back in my face. Della told me she wanted to see how obedient I'd be. She told me she wanted something else."

"What was it?"

"I don't know," the doctor shrugged. "Captain Claxton rescued me by strangling that shrew before she ever got around to trying me again."

"I see," Lansing mused. "You're a toxicologist, correct? That concerns the medical use of poisons, doesn't it?"

"To a degree," Becker replied. "Some medicines have certain

poisons among their ingredients — strychnine and arsenic for example. There's even research being conducted to evaluate possible medicinal value of certain snake venom. However, our main concern is the development of new anti-toxins. Every year, thousands of people die from poison — tainted food, children consuming household products, suicide victims. Many could be saved by an effective anti-toxin."

"Admirable," Lansing remarked. "By the way, since you weren't at the Doctors' Ball last night, where were you?"

"In my apartment."

"With your wife?"

"We're separated," Becker replied. "She's gone back to the states."

"So you were alone."

"Yes," Becker admitted.

"I notice you were in Special Forces in Korea."

"You've been reading my file, eh?" the doctor said with irritation. "Yes, I was a medic in a Special Forces unit before I got my commission."

"Even medics in a Special Forces outfit are taught how to use a garrote, aren't they?"

"You're trying to accuse *me* of killing Della Claxton?" the doctor demanded. "I notice that 'screaming eagle' patch on your shoulder, Major. You were taught how to strangle an enemy when you were an Airborne Ranger, weren't you? So were thousands of other soldiers stationed in USAEUR!"

"But how many of them had a motive?" Lansing inquired.

THREE ENLISTED MEN DRESSED IN FATIGUE UNIFORMS and motorcycle crash helmets, stood on the sidewalk facing Captain Craig Marsh. A slender, young officer with an almost-handsome face, flawed by the sharpness of his nose and chin, Marsh held a large spray-can as he smiled thinly.

"All right, gentlemen," he announced. "Attack!"

They did. As the trio charged forward, Marsh aimed the nozzle of the spray can at the pavement and fired a stream of yellowish liquid. Suddenly, the advancing soldiers were struggling to keep their balance as their feet slid on the slick substance. One by one, they slipped and fell to the ground.

"Did anyone break any bones or sprain anything?" the Captain inquired as the men slid on their bellies like seals until they were clear of the slippery material. "It doesn't appear that any of you did. After

all, you knew what to expect. Most rioters, looters, or whatever wouldn't be prepared to take a quick trip to the ground. This is still the best way we've got to test instant-banana-peel in action. Go inside and the medics will examine your bruises."

Marsh turned and walked to Major Lansing, who had observed the demonstration with interest. "I understood you were testing non-lethal weapons for possible use by the military police."

"To be exact, Major," Marsh began as he led Lansing through a side door into his laboratory. "I'm testing the *results* of such devices on the subjects they're used on." He gestured to a variety of objects stacked on a long table. "Take a look at some of those contraptions," he invited.

Lansing scanned the collection of non-lethal weapons and restraining devices including plastic riot-cuffs, cans of chemical mace, an object resembling a fancy plastic flashlight, a large net, teargas grenades and several batons made of wood, plastic and hard rubber.

"After the riot in Miami last June, we've received notice that racial tensions can still erupt into violence," Marsh said. "Everyone seems to be demonstrating for one cause or another these days. People are protesting draft registration, nuclear power, and every group from the Ku Klux Klan to the advocates for gay rights have rallies in the middle of major cities throughout America. Any of these can spark collective violence that requires the use of non-lethal weapons by civilian or military law enforcement problems with drunks, PCP junkies and run-of-the-mill lunatics . . ." He smiled. "Excuse the lecture, Major. You didn't come here to talk about my research."

"Not specifically," Lansing admitted. "But I am curious. You're testing the effects of teargas on lungs, mace on one's eyes, whether a plastic nightstick can stop an opponent without breaking bones that a wooden one might, and so on, correct?"

Marsh nodded. "The goal is to stop an aggressor as rapidly as possible, without causing any permanent physical damage or unnecessary risk to law enforcement personnel. I hope to have the answer one day. Luckily, the army supplies me with most of my needs and funds which would otherwise be at the mercy of some police academy's budget or the generosity of civilian government grants."

"Well, let's talk about why I'm here?" Lansing suggested. "How did you get involved with Della Claxton?"

"I wondered when you'd get around to that," Marsh sighed. "You may not believe this, but I didn't know she was married until I heard about what happened last night. Della told me she was an assistant manager for the main PX at Furth where I met her. I should have

guessed it wasn't true, but I suppose I wanted to believe her."

"How long were you associated with Mrs. Claxton?"

"It started and ended last month," Marsh said. "We had a whirlwind romance, as they say, and then I discovered she was seeing young Carlton, a dermatologist at the Nuremberg Hospital. I don't care to play second-fiddle to any man, let alone some snot-nosed lieutenant. I broke up with Della. Until now, I'd thought that had been the end of it."

"Did she ever try to blackmail you?"

"Blackmail?" the doctor raised his eyebrows. "I don't have anything worth blackmailing me for."

"Where were you last night at the time of the Doctors' Ball?"

"I was returning from a three day trip to the MP unit at Patterson Barracks in Bonn. Captain Harold Humpheries has been conducting his own research in the field of non-lethal weapons. We exchanged information and compared notes."

"Master Sergeant Jim Snow, the NCOIC of an MP section at Patterson, is a friend of mine," Lansing said. "I'll ask him to check out your story."

"Certainly, Major." Marsh shrugged. "You'll learn that I left Patterson yesterday morning. However, I didn't arrive in Nuremberg until late last night because I missed my original train."

"Then you can't prove your whereabouts for last night?"

"All the passengers on the train were Germans and I don't speak the language. I doubt if any of them could support my alibi, isn't that what it's called?"

"Sometimes," Lansing said. "By the way, have you ever tested any tranquilizers for sedating subjects?"

"Just phenobarbital," Marsh replied. "We found it could be injected into an aggressor after he'd been strapped down, but our efforts to perfect a dart-gun, firing a phenobarbital loaded projectile with a CO₂ pistol, was an utter failure since the drug doesn't react quickly enough unless it enters a vein."

"Does phenobarbital cause intense pain when it enters a sensitive area, say at the base of the spine?"

"No more than any other injection," the doctor said. "Less than most. That's a rather odd question, Major."

"I'm investigating a rather odd case, Captain," Lansing answered.

FIRST LIEUTENANT VINCENT CARLTON WORE A BLACK, Chinese-style martial arts uniform as he moved slowly across the mat in the hospital gymnasium. His back erect, his chin held close to his

chest and his eyes staring forward in meditative concentration, Carlton's arms and legs moved with the grace of a ballet dancer. He pushed both open palms into the air as if holding off a great weight, then pivoted smoothly. He repeated the exercise.

"I haven't seen anyone practice *tai-chi chuan* for several years," Major Lansing said as he approached the mat.

"From what I heard you're something of a karate expert yourself," Carlton said.

"Then you know who I am?"

The Lieutenant nodded. "I recognize you from the Doctors' Ball last night. One isn't apt to forget the famous Major Lansing. I assume you want to ask me about my relationship with Della Claxton."

"That's right," Lansing said. "How long were you involved with her?"

"I knew her for two months," Carlton answered, his eyes reflecting bitter-sweet memories. "She was beautiful, sensitive and lonely. At least that's what I thought."

"Did you know she was married?"

"Not at first," the young officer answered. "And later it didn't matter. Her husband never treated her well. Did you know he struck her at the party? If I had seen him hit her, I would have broken both his arms. Perhaps Della would still be alive if I hadn't already left the ballroom."

"Why did you leave?"

"Della had announced her involvement with three men, including myself. I was upset and frightened. Adulterous conduct with the wife of a superior officer is bound to cause trouble. Right then, I just wanted to get out of there."

"The desk clerk said he saw a man that fit your description, mount the stairs a couple minutes before the Claxtons charged out of the ballroom."

"I went to my room to meditate and regain control of my emotions," Carlton said. "I felt the woman I loved had betrayed me and my career as an officer in the United States Army had come to an end."

"You were angry?"

"More disappointed — perhaps I should say, disillusioned," the doctor explained. "But Claxton murdered Della. Why are you asking all these questions?"

"I only have one question left," Lansing assured him. "As *tai-chi chuan* is a form of self-defense as well as a method of exercising the body and developing harmony with one's mind, spirit and flesh, you must have studied nerve centers and pressure points."

"Naturally," Carlton admitted. "As a doctor I also know a little about anatomy."

"Of course," Lansing agreed. "Do you know of any pressure points at the small of the back?"

"A sharp blow to the base of the spine or the tail bone might stun an opponent temporarily. An exceptional blow could cause permanent damage or even death. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondered if you knew the answer," Lansing replied mildly.

"ARE YOU STILL TRYING TO MAKE SOMETHING OUT OF THIS homicide case?" Conglose demanded as he paced in front of Major Lansing's desk.

"I thought you were going to be too busy with your heroin investigation to help me this time," Lansing commented dryly, shuffling through a collection of 201 files, police and medical reports, and witness statements.

"All my leads have drawn a blank," Conglose replied. "Just like your investigation!"

"That's hardly accurate, Major," Lansing told him. "Carlton claimed he went to his room, but he could have entered the Claxtons' quarters and waited for Della. Neither Becker nor Marsh can prove where they were at the time of the murder. There's a door in the parking lot of the Gesund Hotel that leads to a flight of stairs that serves as an emergency exit in case of fire. Anyone could have gotten to the second floor without being observed."

"But Claxton is still the most likely suspect," Conglose insisted.

"He's the most *obvious* suspect," Lansing corrected. "Becker says Della was trying to blackmail him and that's a pretty strong motive for murder. Carlton and Marsh were both lovers scorned, which has been the source of many a homicide. All three men's military careers were threatened by their affairs with Mrs. Claxton. This would be especially important to Becker and Marsh as they're conducting major research in their chosen fields."

"Well, if there's any truth to Claxton's story, some sort of drug must have been involved," Conglose said. "I'd say that would point the finger of suspicion at the toxicologist. He may have given Claxton a mild dose of strychnine to make him go into convulsions."

"Strychnine is a stimulant, sir," Lansing corrected. "Besides it would have left traces in Claxton's blood. The tests failed to find any evidence of strychnine, phenobarbital, valium or anything else."

"It could be a new kind of substance Becker conjured up in his laboratory," Conglose suggested. "God, you've got me supporting

your crazy theory!"

"You may have the answer, sir," Lansing remarked. "But it's also possible that no drugs were used to disable Claxton."

"How else could it be done?"

"Both Marsh and Carlton know a great deal about subduing an aggressor," Lansing answered. "Putting an unsuspecting man out of action would be even easier."

"I don't buy that kung fu stuff," Conglose muttered sourly. "Besides, Claxton said it felt like it felt like someone stuck him with a needle . . . and don't tell me it was Carlton's fingernails!"

"Carlton is a practitioner of *tai chi*, a Chinese martial art," Lansing began. "He may have picked up a few other techniques of Chinese origin, such as acupuncture."

"Come on, Lansing," Conglose groaned. "That's all crap."

"No, it isn't," the homicide investigator insisted. "Acupuncture has been used quite effectively in the West, especially as an anesthetic. As a doctor and a *tai chi* artist, it wouldn't be surprising if Carlton studied Chinese medicine. Also, an acupuncture needle doesn't leave a mark."

"Does that mean we can eliminate Marsh from the suspects?"

We? Lansing thought, but he said, "No, Marsh is still on the list. He may have used some sort of device — perhaps a baton with a brass stunning knob — to take out Claxton. Although, I'd imagine that would leave a tell-tale bruise."

"Which leaves us right where we started," Conglose snorted. "Everybody *could* have done it, but Claxton is *still* the most logical suspect."

"I feel like I'm overlooking something," Lansing said, again shuffling through the papers. "A statement or an observation . . ." suddenly, he pulled two sheets from the pile. "Of course!" he declared.

"Damn it, Lansing," Conglose snapped. "This time you're going to tell what the clue is before you miraculously solve the case!"

"Certainly, sir," Lansing agreed. "Claxton told me that his wife pulled the door open and entered the room. Then he did the same thing."

"How else could he enter the room?" Conglose asked, more confused than ever.

"Don't you see?" Lansing asked. "The door was locked when Captain Kilpatrick and the others reached it."

"So what?" Conglose demanded.

"Now I know who did it," Lansing said as he rose from his seat. "But how did he . . ."

"Who did it?" Conglose asked desperately. "How do you know?"

Lansing snapped his fingers. "What's the matter with me! I actually saw it and didn't realize what it was!"

"What what is?"

"I'm going to draw a forty-five from the arms room, sir," Lansing told Conglose as he moved to the door. "I might need to borrow Doyle's lock picks as well."

"Lansing, you tell me where you're going!"

"After I get what I need here I'm going to the GSG-Nine branch in Nuremberg," Lansing answered as he opened the door.

"GSG-Nine? Why, that's the West German anti-terrorist section! What do you want from them?"

"A wetsuit," Lansing replied. "They carry all sorts of special equipment, including frogman's gear."

"A wetsuit? Frogman's gear?" Conglose was so puzzled his head hurt.

"Yes, sir," Lansing confirmed as he left the office. "You wouldn't want me to go the navy, would you?"

PICKING THE LOCK TO THE LABORATORY DOOR WAS CHILD'S
play to an advanced student of breaking and entry tactics, like Clifford Lansing. He stepped inside and flicked on a small penlight as he closed the door. Slowly, he moved the narrow beam of white light across the room, examining the table in the center of the lab. He frowned as he failed to locate the object of his search.

Suddenly, the mercury-tube lights overhead flickered alive. The harsh light caused Lansing to squint as a voice announced, "Is this what you're looking for, Major?"

Lansing looked up to see Captain Marsh standing across the room with an object that resembled a fancy plastic flashlight in his hands. "That's it," the CID investigator admitted.

Marsh scanned Lansing. The Major wore a field jacket over his khaki uniform with a web-belt fastened around his narrow waist. A holstered .45 automatic hung on his right hip. "When you saw it this morning among the other non-lethal weapons," he said. "I thought you didn't know what it was. Then I saw you pull into the parking lot a few minutes ago. You left me no choice, Major. I turned off the lab lights, locked the door and hid in the bathroom."

"Don't expect me to apologize," Lansing said. "Actually, I didn't recognize that little gizmo before. I'd only seen photographs of the TASER before in an article I read a couple years ago. The concept of the device didn't impress me very much so I filed it away in my mind

under irrelevant information."

"You shouldn't have," Marsh declared. "The TASER is a bold step forward in the field of non-lethal weapons. It fires needle-like darts that send a stunning electrical charge into an opponent, enough to disable without causing lasting injury."

"Of course, the effect of an electrical shock varies a great deal from one individual to another," Lansing said. "A small person or one with a heart condition or other ailment, or even someone that happens to be wet at the time, might be killed by a TASER charge. On the other hand, a large man, like Captain Claxton would only be stunned for a few seconds."

"It worked well enough for me," Marsh stated. "So you know how I took care of Claxton, but how did you know I was the one that killed Della?"

"The more I thought about the incident at the Doctors' Ball," Lansing began, holding his hands high. "The more certain I became that Della had baited her husband. She'd insulted and embarrassed him in front of the entire party. She urged him to lose his temper and threaten her before leading him upstairs. That's because you were waiting there for them. You and Della were plotting together. That's why she knew the door was unlocked when she reached her room and didn't bother to get her key out of her purse that night. It's also why she didn't latch the door to keep her husband out, because you both wanted him to enter. Of course, Della didn't know what you had in mind that night."

"You make it all sound so cold-blooded, Lansing."

"What else can it be called?" Lansing said. "I suspect Della thought you were on your way to fame and fortune by your success in the field of non-lethal weapons. The idea of being the wife or the lover of a successful inventor appealed to her more than being straddled to a near-alcoholic who'd been passed up for promotion to field grade officer more than once. For some reason she didn't try to divorce Claxton. Was that because the scandal involved in such an action, followed by your marriage to Claxton's ex-wife, would probably cause the army to *encourage* you to resign your commission for the good of the service?"

"I told you I needed the equipment and the funds the military supplied me with," Marsh said softly.

"So, being a good, humanitarian advocate of non-lethal weapons," Lansing sneered, "you agreed to help Della murder her husband. What were you going to do? Zap him with that TASER and hang him from the light fixture to make it appear to be suicide?"

"How'd you guess?"

"The curtain cord," Lansing replied. "Della would wonder why you had it otherwise. She didn't know you planned to kill her and put the blame on Claxton."

"That stupid, greedy whore," Marsh muttered. "She didn't realize that the scandal would still be as bad for my career whether she got the divorce, her husband was killed or he supposedly committed suicide. Della really wasn't bright enough to be the wife of next year's Nobel Peace Prize Winner."

"At least you're pretty confident in your own ability."

"In another year, perhaps less," Marsh began, a fanatic glow appearing on his thin face. "I will have developed a stun-gun a thousand times better than this TASER. It will be able to stop entire groups of aggressors at once! Riots will be stopped without violence or damage to property, law enforcement personnel will never have to kill a felon again, and we'll win wars without blood-shed! It's my moral duty to see to the success of that goal . . . and no self-centered bitch with a lush husband was going to stop me."

Marsh smiled coldly. "And you won't stop me either," he vowed. "I didn't want to kill again, but you've forced my hand."

"It's my fault, eh?"

"The TASER leaves no trace," Marsh commented. "I'll stun you into unconsciousness and take you for a little ride in your own car."

"Drowning accident?" Lansing guessed.

"No," Marsh shrugged. "You're going to park on the railroad tracks a bit too long. There probably won't be enough of you left for identification after that train hits you."

"I think I've heard enough," Lansing said.

"So do I," Marsh agreed. "Good-bye, Major."

He squeezed the trigger of the TASER. The needle-like projectiles hurled across the room to strike Lansing in the center of his chest. Marsh's smile vanished as his victim stood calmly, completely unaffected by the six hundred volts of electricity that coursed through the TASER guidelines. Lansing drew his .45 Colt from its holster.

"What . . ." Marsh stammered, unable to believe the charge had failed to disable his opponent. "How?"

Lansing jerked down the zipper of his field jacket to reveal the shiny black garment beneath. "A wetsuit is made of rubber," he explained. "The best insulation available against electricity." Aiming his pistol at the doctor, Lansing added, "Think you'll do as well against a .45 slug, Marsh?"

The Captain shook his head grimly. He dropped the useless TASER

to the floor and raised his hands.

MAJOR LANSING AND MAJOR CONGLOSE ESCORTED Captain David Claxton from his cell later that night. Claxton sighed with relief as he walked to the front desk to collect his belongings. Conglose turned to Lansing, an expression of consternation painted on his moon face.

"I still don't understand how you figured Marsh was the guilty one," Conglose admitted. "How did you discount Carlton and Becker, for crissake?"

"When I decided Della had been involved in her own nasty plans, that eliminated Carlton because he isn't stupid, and only a fool would go up the front stairwell instead of the fire stairs where no one would see him, to get to the Claxtons' room. No one who'd planned such a complex murder would allow himself to be at the party and obviously involved with Della. Besides, Carlton's a martial artist, which means he has better than average control of his emotions and is philosophically opposed to taking human life unless in self-defense."

"If you say so," Conglose snorted. "What about Becker?"

"He told me about his affair with Della, never trying to excuse his involvement or claim ignorance that she was married. He admitted that she'd tried to blackmail him and he'd originally agreed to it and would have probably surrendered to extortion again. Why would he give me a possible motive for to kill Della if he wasn't innocent? Besides, Della was finished with him and he wouldn't have been her co-conspirator in the plot to kill her husband."

"I wonder what she planned to blackmail him for."

"My guess is drugs," Lansing answered. "To try to sell narcotics wouldn't be above that would-be black widow."

"Narcotics?" Conglose frowned.

"I know, that's your department," Lansing nodded. "But don't worry. You still have an unsolved heroin investigation to keep you busy."

Conglose groaned with dismay.

NEXT MONTH

Mike Shayne returns in a brand-new mystery adventure!

DON'T MISS IT!

He hadn't killed anyone since World War II, when he'd shot twenty-three of the enemy. Now it was time for number twenty-four!

Sea Shells

by R. TUTTLE

SPAULDING J. ABERNATHY, Ph.D. 1952, University of California, was probably the world's foremost expert on Marine Life; specifically, Mollusks, a family that included clams, squid and snails. His hobby was photographing and studying the fascinating bric-a-brac from the sea, sea shells, and he had developed his expertise on the subject to the point where he had several respected sea shell books to his credit.

But there he sat in his cluttered study thoughtfully examining a sleek thirty-eight revolver.

Abernathy was a mild looking little man, somewhat rotund, with thinning brown hair topping a normally pleasant, affable face. His hands were small but quite agile as he checked over the gun. A gun was not a complete stranger to Abernathy. As a teenage marine in World War II — he'd just made the height requirement — he had started at Guadalcanal and had fought his way to Iwo Jima before a well-placed bullet sent him back to the States.

There was a light knock on his study door. He quickly shoved the gun into a drawer.

"Come in." He had a pleasant teacher's voice that had resounded through many a college classroom.

The door opened and a young, eager-faced girl with long blonde hair stepped in. She was wearing a red blouse, shabby dungarees and sneakers. "Hey, Professor. Can I have my grade?"

He smiled. Debbie Prentice, one of his brighter students. She was so

much like his neice, Gloria. "Certainly. You will receive an A."

"Great! You coming to the football game?"

"No. I must get ready for my trip. I'm taking a short leave of absence in order to gather more material for a book on sea shells."

"Seashells. Wow. You've already written a couple of books on sea shells. Where you going?"

"Bermuda."

The girl frowned. "Wasn't that where your sister and neice — ?" She paused in some confusion. "Sorry, Professor. Look. I got to go. You have a good trip and thanks for the A." She touched Abernathy's arm briefly, then left the office.

Right, Debbie. A year ago, his sister, Joan and neice, Gloria were sitting in a rented car taking pictures of a small fishing boat unloading on the beach below. The car had been parked off the dirt road on a high bluff overlooking the ocean. In the middle of their picture taking, the car had suddenly started to roll and before the two women could react, they had plunged to their death on the rocky beach below.

They had been innocent witnesses to a heroin delivery and had been disposed of.

A frightened young girl had seen the big, grim looking young man push the small car over the cliff. Knowing about the powerful smuggling ring and the ease with which they killed, she had fled the island and after relating the tragic details to Abernathy at his mid-west university, had disappeared into the innards of California.

His first impulse had been to go to the police, but then common sense intervened. He only had a couple of names and a story from a nameless girl who worked briefly for the illicit organization.

He opened the drawer and looked at the gun.

He would take care of the investigation, trial and punishment himself.

A WEEK LATER, A LARGE, DARKLY HANDSOME YOUNG MAN with ear length black hair was lounging in a plush office overlooking the sparkling blue-green ocean. Clad in brown shorts and sandals, he looked to be a model of the ideal Bermuda tourist. He was actually Gar Torgson, one of the lesser lights in an international smuggling operation that stretched from Europe to the United States.

Seated at a neat desk, a small, dapper-looking man in immaculate white smoked a slender cigar and fingered a brandy and soda. Vince De Marko, known to his underlings as simply the Boss. He had a narrow, intelligent looking face and dark hair.

Torgson lighted a cigarette and yawned. "You changed the unload-

ing operation, huh?"

De Marko sipped his drink. "Yes. Ever since your brilliant — " his voice rang with sarcasm " — work on the two women, the New York office ordered me to move the operation. They were quite angry about the incident, by the way. You were fortunate that there were no witnesses. Torgson, we must not bother the tourists — unless one of them happens to be a cop. We must keep a low profile. The two women were tourists, mother and daughter."

"They were taking pictures of the boat unloading," protested Torgson.

"They were tading pictures of a picturesque fishing boat," snapped De Marko. "I could have had the film destroyed at the processor." He took a swallow of his drink.

Torgson shrugged. Pushing two women over a cliff was all in a day's work with him, and he couldn't see what all the fuss was about, but he didn't pursue it. "We got a new nut down there now. Some little guy taking pictures of sea shells. I been watching him."

"That's a Doctor Abernathy, a professor from an American mid-western college. He happens to be a well known marine biologist. He is gathering data for another book on sea shells. Leave him alone. He is no threat to us."

"He's taking pictures like crazy," Torgson pointed out.

De Marko shrugged. "Of sea shells. Torgson, why don't you go down to the bar and have a drink?"

"Okay." Torgson left.

De Marko sat back and studied his drink. Sea shells. He made a mental note to have the films checked at the processer — just to make sure.

BERMUDA, BRITISH AS LONDON, IS A COLLECTION of over three hundred islands about 670 miles off the Eastern Coast of United States. Compared to any State in the Union, Bermuda is a tiny dot on the globe. However, surrounded by blue-green ocean and caressed by tropical breezes, the islands are usually fat with tourists who find the area restful and expensive.

Abernathy, a dot himself on the vast beach, was finding it difficult to keep his mind on sea shells. He was opposite the large, modern looking building that housed a bar and grille known as the Grotto — and according to his sources of information, the offices of the smuggling operation.

His target was in there somewhere.

His first few days in Bermuda had been spent taking pictures of sea

shells and taking stock of the area. The gun, disassembled and hidden among his photographic equipment for the plane trip, had been assembled and was resting at the bottom of a suitcase ready for action.

Torgson — Gar Torgson was the man he was after. He worked for a man named De Marko.

He set the shell up on a little mound of sand, studied the small work of art for an instant, then adjusted the tripod to height of about two feet. After attaching the camera he carefully brought the shell into focus, set the f-stop and shutter speed and stood back to wait for a cloud to brush by the sun.

He was suddenly aware of a presence behind him. He turned slightly.

A large dark haired man in shorts was grimly watching him. Torgson? It had to be, if the description was correct.

"Good afternoon," Abernathy said politely.

Torgson nodded curtly then motioned toward the sea shell. "You gonna take a picture of that thing?"

"Yes." He studied the man's face. A bullet just above the ear should be sufficient.

"Why?" Torgson wanted to know. His shallow background could not relate to sea shells. An upbringing in the Bronx had left him with a lust for money, power and the attendant luxuries.

"I am preparing a book on the subject," explained Abernathy. "Many people find sea shells interesting. This shell, for example is a limpet, commonly known as a Chinese hat. You will note that it resembles the broad rimmed hat worn by Chinese field workers."

Torgson, who had never seen a Chinese field worker, stared at the shell, then at Abernathy. "If it's so great, why don't you just stick the thing in your pocket?"

"I prefer to leave the shell in its natural environment for other people to enjoy," replied Abernathy.

Torgson obviously couldn't understand how anybody could enjoy a seashell. He shook his head in disgust. "What a nut." Then he turned and walked off.

Abernathy smiled, checked the camera focus and snapped the picture. His body was covered with a cold sweat and his pulse had risen. This was not good, the job at hand required calm nerves. It must be no different from snapping a picture of a seashell.

HE CONTINUED HIS SHELL HUNTING. An hour later the peace and quiet of a near deserted Bermuda beach was broken by a woman's shrill voice.

"Spaulding Abernathy! What are you doing here?"

Abernathy turned and saw a small, chubby woman in shorts and sweatshirt grinning at him. On her sweatshirt, the words, REAL MC COY, rippled across a large bosom. In her fifties, she had short brown hair and a round cherubic face that was all too familiar.

"Hello, Mary," he said somewhat sadly. Mary Bronstead, a teacher he had had a drink with at a Philadelphia teacher's convention a few years back. "What are you doing in Bermuda?"

"I asked you first." Then, she saw the camera eying a gleaming seashell. "Oh Another seashell book on the horizon. I'm here on a vacation which so far has been Dullsville." She smiled. "Perhaps we can do something exciting together."

"I'm quite busy, Mary. And I'm not very exciting — really. In fact, I'm the Mayor of Dullsville." He didn't need Mary Bronstead!

"Now, that isn't true." She frowned. "Is your family with you? As I remember, you said something about a sister—."

"I have no sister," Abernathy said quite truthfully. "You must be thinking of someone else."

She took a deep breath. "Perhaps. No matter. How about a drink tonight over at the Grotto?"

He'd been thinking about going to the Grotto to observe Torgson's nightly habits. Why not? "All right, Mary. Tonight about eight?"

"By the way, Spaulding, where are you staying?"

"At the Prince."

"Too bad. I'm at Queen's Court."

Abernathy breathed a sigh of relief.

She grinned at him. "See you tonight."

"Right." He watched her walk off for a few seconds, then turned back to his camera.

AFTER A SUPPER OF EXCELLENT PRIME RIB and baked potato followed by several cups of delicious coffee, Abernathy went back to his room for a quiet pipe smoke before facing a session with the talkative Mary. As he sat in front of the large picture window overlooking the beach and idly watched the evening surf, he thought about his sister, Joan.

She had taken care of him all through college and had helped him financially after he graduated. A fine, loving woman! Her husband, a Marine pilot who had made it through the Korean war without mishap, had been killed in a freak auto accident in Los Angeles, leaving Joan and daughter, Gloria. She'd carried on, only to be rewarded with death in Bermuda.

There was a knock on the door. He sighed, rose and opened the door to face a smiling, white-haired man in a wrinkled white suit. A huge mustache covered his mouth and part of his cheeks and the broad, large featured face beamed.

Abernathy's first impression was that of a character out of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

"I say," blurted out the man. "You must be the seashell bloke. Right?"

Abernathy smiled. British as kidney pie. "I suppose you could call me that. Won't you come in?"

The man stepped in. "I'm Brad Rainey. Local police."

Abernathy closed the door. Local police? "What have I done?"

Rainey laughed. "No, I'm not here on official business. I just happen to be a sea shell man myself. Nothing else to do on this bloody island — no crime to speak of — can't drink — high blood pressure —" He pulled a small paperback book out of his pocket. "This is my bible."

Abernathy grinned at the book. It was his first publication. "It's somewhat dated, Mr. Rainey." He went over to the dresser, opened a drawer and pulled out a paperback. "Here is my latest publication that covers most of the seashells found on the east coast of United States and nearby islands."

"Wonderful. Can I pay you?"

Abernathy held up his hands. "Please accept it as a gift."

"Thank you." Rainey shoved the book into a bulging pocket. "And you are gathering data for another book?"

"Yes." Abernathy shrugged. "I like to take pictures of seashells."

"Have you tried the north side of the island? North Beach?"

"No."

Rainey sat down hard in a chair. "It's rather wild over there — no swimming. A few fishermen try their luck. Not much of a beach but thousands of seashells. You could rent a bicycle and be over there in an hour."

"Thanks for the tip. I'll go over there." Abernathy relighted his pipe and sat down. "You say there isn't much crime here?"

"One of your New York policemen would find very little to do here."

"How nice," remarked Abernathy. "I was going over to the Grotto a little later for a drink. Would you recommend it?"

"Certainly." He smiled. "The man that runs it — De Marko — looks like something out of one of your old gangster movies, but he's quite harmless."

"Let's see," Abernathy said thoughtfully. "A large man named

Torgson accosted me on the beach today. Isn't he connected with the Grotto?"

"Oh yes. He's harmless too. A bit retarded perhaps." Rainey twiddled his mustache. "Is this your first visit to Bermuda?"

"Yes. Somebody was telling me about a car going over a cliff about six months ago." Abernathy frowned and blew a puff of smoke up toward the ceiling.

"Oh yes, the two men. Horrible affair. It seemed that they parked too close to the edge and forgot to pull the emergency brake."

"Was anyone around? Any witnesses?"

"Why yes. This man, Torgson in fact. He said he saw the car start to roll but couldn't get there in time to stop it." Rainey eyed Abernathy.

"Did you know the women?"

Abernathy shook his head. "No. The matter came up in a casual conversation a few nights ago."

Rainey looked glumly at the floor for an instant. "I have a bloody meeting to attend — frightfully dull these weekly meetings." He stood. "Thank you for the book, and happy shell hunting."

After a heavy sigh, he left.

Abernathy resumed his pipe smoking, reflecting that it was nice that there was so little crime on the island.

THE NEXT MORNING HE PACKED CAMERA, VARIOUS LENSES and film into his leather carrying case, rented a bicycle and set out for North Beach. It was an easy ride — flat dirt road past picturesque buildings dotting a restful landscape — so he found time to reflect on the previous evening with Mary.

To put it bluntly, she was on the make. Twice she had suggested that they go to her room for a couple of drinks. There was some humor in this because all his life he had generally been ignored by women. There was that one night in New Zealand — but that was a long time ago and he was about nineteen at the time. His conclusions about Mary's social efforts was that she must really be in need of a male of the species to be setting a trap for him.

Their's had been a one way conversation in the Grotto so he had ample time to observe Torgson. A slim, swarthy man (De Marko he assumed) had come downstairs twice for a few minutes but Torgson had remained at the bar all evening drinking and socializing with the young female tourists. Around eleven o'clock he had walked out the back door with a giggling, well-built blonde in shorts and halter — and hadn't returned.

So Torgson was a light drinker but a avid womanizer. Mary, who was

a nightly customer in the Grotto, added to his fund of information by telling him that Torgson picked up a young sweet thing every evening and disappeared out the back door.

"What do they do?" Abernathy had asked.

She had laughed. "I guess they go to his cottage and play chess."

Embarassed, he had dropped the subject.

But he had learned that Torgson cottage was down the beach about a mile away from the Grotto.

He finally reached North Beach and stood for a moment in silent awe as the wild, windblown beauty of the jagged, rocky shore overwhelmed him. A photographer's paradise!

He parked the bike by a rock and walked down to the water's edge. Rainey was right. There were piles of shells between the rocks. He stood for a moment and watched a small fishing boat cruise by, then got out his camera. The morning passed quickly. Except for a few silent fishermen, the area was deserted and he used up three rolls of film.

He arrived back at the hotel at twelve-thirty to find Mary waiting for him.

"I'm going to take you to lunch," she announced with a grim look on her face.

"Well — " He fumbled for words. "I — "

"I won't take no for an answer," she said. "After lunch you can go to bed with your damn sea shells if you want."

He laughed. "All right. Let me drop these films in the mail first. Where are we going?"

"To the Grotto. You must try their scallops."

"Very well."

They went up to his room.

DE MARKO LEANED BACK AT HIS DESK and studied Torgson's agitated face. "You saw the professor at North Beach?"

"Yeah. And he was taking pictures like mad. I was in the boat when I spotted him."

De Marko lighted a cigar. "There's lots of shells over there," he mused. "Did he take a picture of the boat?"

"I dunno. Maybe." He frowned at the floor for an instant. "You better check on them pictures."

"I will decide when to do that, Torgson," De Marko said in a brittle voice. He didn't like underlings telling him how to operate. "I'm sure the professor is only interested in sea shells."

"But North Beach is where we make deliveries."

De Marko reddened. Torgson was getting obnoxious. "Torgson, how would you like to be transferred to New York?"

"Okay — I'll shut up." He shrugged. "I just thought — "

"Stop thinking and go play with your silly women," snapped De Marko. "I'll worry about Abernathy."

Torgson slunk out.

LUNCH AT THE GROTTO WAS EXPENSIVE BUT TASTY and as long as Mary was paying the tab, Abernathy went all out and had scallops with the works. The Grotto was dimly lit and consisted of booths and hardwood tables scattered about the room. A long oak bar lined the far wall and a dark-skinned piano man softly played a white piano in a corner. Nice atmosphere, Abernathy had to admit.

He ate in silence as Mary chattered on about her morning activities which consisted primarily of a swim in the ocean and a parade of martinis. Suddenly, she paused and eyed Abernathy.

"Spaulding, you haven't heard a word I've said. What in the world are you thinking about?"

He finished a scallop and smiled. "I hang on to your every word, Mary."

"Hell you do. You're probably thinking about your silly sea shells."

Actually, Abernathy had been thinking about Torgson and had been mentally exploring the idea of shooting the man sometime after eleven o'clock that night.

"Perhaps I am, Mary. This is a delightful lunch."

She sighed. "I came to Bermuda to have some fun and so far — ." She paused. "Here comes De Marko. Do you know him?"

"No." Abernathy looked up and saw the slim, dapper man walking toward their table.

De Marko stopped at the table. He smiled pleasantly. "Doctor Abernathy, I believe. Are you enjoying your lunch?" De Marko could be charming when the occasion demanded. "I manage the Grotto. Vince De Marko."

"Why, yes," answered Abernathy. "Have you met Miss Mary Bronstead?"

"No." He smiled at Mary. "A pleasure."

Mary grinned at him. "Hi."

De Marko transferred his attention to Abernathy. "I couldn't help but notice that you are taking hundreds of pictures of our beautiful seashells."

"Yes." Abernathy added some sugar to his coffee. "I am going to include the pictures in a new book I'm writing — about sea shells of

course." He flashed a smile. For some reason his hand trembled slightly as he stirred the coffee.

De Marko nodded. "I was wondering if I might purchase one of your photographs, enlarged of course, for my office."

"I'll be glad to give you one as soon as the processing is complete."

"How kind of you. Which of our processors are you using?"

"I send the film back to the States."

De Marko's smile faded. "Oh? We have some excellent processing labs here — and we offer a special rate for color."

"I know. However, this lab back home knows my special needs." Abernathy took a sip of coffee. "I'll have one of my films processed here and you can take your pick of the lot."

De Marko nodded. "Thank you. Have you been over at North Beach yet?"

"Yes. This morning. A fortune in shells over there. I plan to go again."

"I see." He looked at Mary. "Nice to meet you, Miss Bronstead. If you will excuse me, I have a few things to attend to. Enjoyed talking to you."

He walked off.

Back in his office, De Marko sat down at his desk and thoughtfully sipped a glass of brandy. The professor seemed to be simply a professor combining a vacation with the business of gathering data for a book. Yet — De Marko's mind, programmed by a lifetime of doubt and suspicion of his fellow man, was beginning to ferment distrust. Perhaps that idiot, Torgson, was right. There might be more to Abernathy than seashells.

He finished the brandy and picked up the telephone.

ABERNATHY WENT BACK TO NORTH BEACH THAT afternoon, this time taking Mary with him. She promised to be quiet while he took his pictures and managed to keep her promise most of the time. After shooting two rolls of film, he sat down beside her on a rock and gazed out at the peaceful ocean, its surface broken only by a graceful sailboat and a drab-looking fishing boat.

The fishing boat made a turn and dropped anchor.

They watched in silence as a small rowboat was dropped into the water.

Then, the rowboat was lifted back on deck and the fishing boat hauled in its anchor and moved off.

"I'll be damned," Abernathy said softly. Had they been watching the start of a loading operation?

"What?" She looked at him oddly.

"Nothing. Let's go."

AT SIX OCLOCK THAT EVENING DE MARKO SAT IN HIS OFFICE listening to an agitated Torgson.

"I'm telling you, Boss — that seashell nut was watching us —!"

"So, you scrubbed the operation," De Marko said quietly. "Good thinking. I am investigating Doctor Abernathy and I'll let you know if steps have to be taken to remove him."

"I think he's a cop."

De Marko thought for a few seconds. "Quite possible." He eyed Torgson. "Has that little woman come in for supper? What's her name? Mary Bronstead?"

"She was with him today. And she came in a couple of minutes ago."

"Yeah."

De Marko rose and adjusted his shirt. "I think I'll take her to supper."

"She'll talk your ear off."

"Exactly what I want," De Marko said with a smile.

THAT NIGHT, ABERNATHY ATE A QUIET MEAL at his own hotel, had a drink at the bar, then went to his room. After lighting his pipe, he sat down and tried to concentrate on his seashell notes — but they left him cold. In his mind's eye he saw only Torgson's leering face and bullets.

He'd have to do it tonight.

It was quite obvious that De Marko was paying more attention to him than he would the usual tourist. A picture of a seashell indeed! De Marko was fishing for something. Perhaps De Marko thought he was a spy or something. Abernathy laughed, then sobered almost immediately. Thoughts like that running through De Marko's mind could get him killed.

Yes. He'd have to take care of Torgson tonight.

The decision made, he forced himself to spend the next several hours rewriting his seashell notes.

At eleven o'clock, he put on dark slacks and sweater and finally a black, cotton jacket. He checked the revolver, then dropped it into the jacket pocket. He turned off the room lights and opened the curtain to look out at the night. It was a moonless night and there was a hint of rain in the air.

He opened the window wider and stepped out on the sand.

TEN MINUTES LATER, HE WAS STANDING BY A SCRUB TREE in back of the Grotto. It was twenty minutes after eleven and if Mary was correct, Torgson should be coming out the back door any minute. Abernathy's body was tense with anticipation — and fear. After all, it had been a long time since he'd killed a man. Back in the South Pacific he was shooting down enemy uniforms, a grimly silly game played by heads of nations.

He knew Torgson, had talked to him, had learned to hate him.

Killing that hood would be a pleasure.

Suddenly, Torgson appeared. He seemed to be half dragging a young girl who apparently wasn't in tune with his nightly ambition. Abernathy grinned faintly. The big slob probably hadn't put enough liquor into her.

The girl finally slithered out of Torgson's grasp and darted back inside. Torgson cursed, threw his hands up in disgust and began walking down the beach.

Abernathy huddled beside the tree. Just as well that the girl wasn't going to be along. After the big man had passed him, Abernathy began following, padding silently through the wet sand, hugging the trees and bushes.

Torgson stopped for a few seconds to light a cigarette and Abernathy slid behind a bush. The big man shoved his hands in his pocket and began walking again. Abernathy stepped out from behind the bush and continued to follow.

His right hand gripped the gun.

Torgson stopped again and looked back.

Abernathy froze by a tree. He wondered if Torgson had a gun. Probably not. The British had this thing about citizens carrying guns.

Torgson began walking a little faster.

Abernathy suddenly realized that in another five minutes or so, Torgson would reach his cottage. He called, "Torgson!"

Torgson stopped and turned slowly. He saw the gun glistening in the dim light. "The seashell nut. What's going on?" His voice quivered with anger and fear. He didn't have a gun.

"The two women in the car, Torgson," Abernathy said. "You killed them."

"That was an accident!" Torgson began backing away toward the ocean. "I — " He stopped, suddenly aware that he was inches away from the edge of a rocky bluff over looking the ocean.

Abernathy raised the gun and took aim at Torgson's head. He couldn't possibly miss at that distance.

"Hey, wait!" Torgson's voice was high pitched now, almost child-

like. He inadvertently stepped back and with a cry of anguish plummeted to the rocks some fifty feet below.

Abernathy lowered the gun and stared in disbelief. He could have carried out this business with a water pistol! He walked to the edge and looked over. Somewhere down in the darkness there was a broken body.

He unloaded the gun and flipped the bullets over the edge. Then, he threw the gun in the general direction of the ocean.

So much for his mission to Bermuda.

BACK IN HIS ROOM, HE HAD A QUICK SHOWER, put on a robe over his pajamas and sat down. He lighted his pipe. Somehow, the satisfaction from a job completed hadn't surfaced. His sister and neice were still dead. His only accomplishment was possibly saving a few young girls from being ravaged. Which was something, he supposed.

There was a knock at the door. After a pause, he opened the door cautiously and saw a smiling De Marko. He was wearing a dapper, form-fitting raincoat and rain hat.

"Good evening, Doctor." De Marko stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Er — I had planned to retire, Mr. De Marko," Abernathy said, suddenly feeling a surge of apprehension.

"Do you usually enter the room through your front window?"

Abernathy nodded. "I'm afraid so. It's quite convenient to the beach."

"I saw you come in. Out for a walk?"

"Yes. I couldn't sleep." Abernathy sat down and relighted his pipe.

"Did you wish to see me? About the seashell picture perhaps?"

De Marko laughed. "No. Not about the picture." He turned serious. "I had an interesting discussion with your girl friend and learned that you have a sister and neice — or should I say, had?" He eyed Abernathy. "Some time ago, a car with two women in it plunged over a cliff near here. Were they your sister and neice?"

"No." Abernathy sucked on his pipe.

"You're lying. According to your home town paper files, a Doctor Abernathy lost his sister and neice in an accident in Bermuda a few months ago."

Abernathy studied De Marko's face for an instant. "You are efficient, aren't you." He set his pipe down in the ashtray. "I was lying. My way of trying to forget."

"I also learned that as an ex-marine, you are not a stranger to violence, that you have killed quite a number of your enemies."

"Wartime enemies," put in Abernathy. "Twenty-three, to be exact."

A gleam of admiration flashed in De Marko's eyes. His record was a mere five. "And I suppose Torgson will be number twenty-four." He lighted a cigarette. "Let us stop playing games, Abernathy. Frankly, I don't care whether you kill Torgson or not." He paused. "You appear to know something about our organization. That concerns me."

Abernathy; wishing he had kept the gun, picked up his pipe and dumped the ashes into a tray. "What is there to know? You run a bar." He shrugged and began stuffing tobacco into the pipe bowl.

"For example," De Marko went on, "how did you learn about Torgson's part in the deaths of the two women?"

Abernathy lighted his pipe. "Oh — was he involved?" For some odd reason, he found himself enjoying the grim dialogue exchange.

De Marko laughed a brittle laugh. "Come on, Abernathy. Perhaps I should have Torgson talk to you — "

An involuntary grin appeared on Abernathy's face for an instant — quickly noted by De Marko who paused to study the little man's impassive face.

De Marko picked up the telephone, waited impatiently for a second. "Give me the Grotto." He smashed his cigarette into a tray, then lighted another. "De Marko here. Carlen? I want Torgson immed — ." He stopped and stared into the telephone. "What? Dead! Fell off — " He hung up. A mirthless smile formed on his thin lips. "So, Abernathy. You have already scored number twenty-four. How did you manage to push him off Pirate's Ridge?"

"You're guessing, De Marko," Abernathy said through a puff of smoke.

Frustation was written all over De Marko's face. "Abernathy, I don't care about Torgson. I'm probably better off with him dead and while the details of his encounter with you would make fascinating reading — " He shrugged. "They don't really matter." He eyed Abernathy. "What do you plan to do now, Professor?"

"As soon as I collect a few more shell pictures for my publication, I plan to return to college and resume my teaching activities." Abernathy's calm, expressionless face reflected none of the turmoil inside. He had decided to play the role of innocence to the hilt.

"Pictures," mused De Marko. "Of seashells, I assume. Doctor, there is a tiny island a few miles from here where there are literally millions of beautiful shells. Why don't you and I go out there tonight and spend tomorrow roaming about the beach? I have a well equipped

boat at my disposal."

And a couple of hoods with guns, thought Abernathy. "To be truthful, Mr. De Marko, I'd rather go over to North Beach again."

"I see," De Marko said thoughtfully.

BEFORE HE COULD CONTINUE, THERE WAS A KNOCK at the door. Abernathy quickly turned the knob and looked out at a grinning Mary.

Mary!" He smiled broadly. "Please come in."

There was a bottle of scotch in her right hand and a plastic bag full of ice cubes in her left. She stepped in and flashed a smile at De Marko.

"Hi," she said. "Spaulding, I thought you might need a drink."

How true! Abernathy grinned. "I'll get some glasses. Would you care to join us, Mr. De Marko?"

De Marko sighed and pulled a small revolver out of his pocket. "You two will join me on my boat." There was a note of finality in his voice.

Mary looked at the gun. "The fishing boat?"

De Marko nodded. "Are you two working together?" He shrugged. "Let's not play games. You are both narcotic agents."

She smiled. "I'm flattered, Mr. De Marko." Her face turned serious. "About that fishing boat, I think Rainey and his boys are on their way out to it now. It seems that somebody tipped them off there were drugs aboard."

"What!" De Marko fell apart for an instant. "Who? You?"

"No." She set the scotch on a small table. "It seems that your man Torgson fell off Pirate's Ridge and while Rainey was looking into that, somebody told him about the fishing boat."

De Marko eyed Abernathy. "Perhaps I've been mistaken." He whirled suddenly and left the room.

Abernathy looked at Mary in amazement. "What's this all about?"

"Make up a couple of drinks while I call Rainey. He's sitting down at his office having a cup of tea." She grabbed the telephone. "You see no one has told him about the fishing boat yet. After De Marko spent about an hour quizzing me about you I decided to try to find out what was going on." She paused, then spoke into the telephone. "Get me Lieutenant Rainey as soon as possible." She turned back to Abernathy. "So I followed him and saw him come to your room. Then, after I saw the gun, I thought about the fishing boat. I've always thought there was something screwy about that boat. This area is not noted for commercial fishing."

"Are there drugs aboard?"

"Who knows? Make up those drinks. . . . Lieutenant Rainey?" She took a deep breath and after a grin at Abernathy, began in a low voice. "De Marko's fishing boat is loaded with drugs. You better get out there immediately." She hung up.

"Are you an agent?" Abernathy asked, handing her a drink.

"I am an agent of love, Spaulding." She held up her glass. "Here's to seashells."

"Right," he said. "May they litter our shores forever."

"If that's the case," Mary said, "we can forget about them for one night."

Abernathy took two swallows of his drink and sighed. "I suppose we could. I don't know how to thank you for getting rid of De Marko."

"I know a way," she said. She pointed to his glass. "Drink up and have another."

Abernathy nodded. What the Hell . . .

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It had happened years ago, losing his eyes, and now the memory was coming back to him, returning with deadly accuracy!

In The Corn

by AL SARRANTONIO

“DO YOU REMEMBER LOSING YOUR EYES?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

“I . . . was three years old, playing with my brother and governess in a wide yellow field in back of our house. It was Autumn, and the grass was stiff; I remember it was cold that day. My brother and I were tumbling on the grass, throwing each other over our shoulders, laughing. The governess, Nancy, got caught up in our game and began to tumble us over her shoulder also. This is . . . very painful to remember . . .”

“Go on. You must tell me.”

“She was roughhousing with us, and began to pick one and then the other up, swinging us high in the air. I remember her twirling me around. We were all getting dizzy and were laughing uncontrollably. We had wandered somewhat from the center of the field toward an edge bordered by a row of picked corn; the stalks were stiff and dry and stood up straight. I can almost see the sun on their dry yellow Nancy was laughing as if she were our own age; actually, she was only a few years older than my brother. I was running around and around her, chasing my brother, and Nancy suddenly picked me up, a bit too fast, tumbling me up and over her shoulder. I remember the stalks of corn coming at my eyes like deformed spears, I can see them now like I could then, as if in slow motion, coming up towards my eyes, and then into them . . .”

“Go on . . .”

“Doctor, I can’t . . .”

“You must.”

"I . . . remember screaming, hearing myself scream, and I remember flailing my arms and hands, trying to pull the stalks from my eyes, sitting on the ground and screaming uncontrollably, *shrieking*, my entire body shaking, and then feeling hands on me, Nancy's hands. I can remember her hands on my face, and the sticky mass of tears and blood, and then I could feel her tugging at the stalks, pulling them free one at a time, gently, and there was . . . a *sound* . . . as she did it, a *sucking* sound . . ."

"Yes?"

"I can't"

"I told you, you *must*. Continue."

"No!"

"Continue."

"I . . . — no!"

"You must go on."

"The . . . last thing I remember seeing was the governess' face after she had pulled the stalks free. I could see her face through blood, though I could not see very clearly. There was a look of . . ."

"Yes?"

"A look of *horror* on her face, and then my eyes began to unfocus, as if the world were being pulled away, taking the light with it, and I was alone and screaming . . ."

"Can you go on?"

"I . . ."

"Yes?"

"I was so *alone*."

"I understand. Do you remember what happened then?"

"I was sent away to have my eyes cared for."

"And?"

"And . . . there were other things."

"Please explain."

"They told me later, much later, that I had been traumatized. I was ill for a very long time, and would not eat or speak; I lived . . . inside. I went through a lot of therapy, and there were a lot of different doctors and hospitals. I was never sent home. I . . . remember screaming, lots of crying, and then, after a long, long time, a kind of peace came over me . . ."

"Go on."

"I became calm. I told them it was all right, that I wanted to go home. But they wouldn't listen to me. They wouldn't send me home. I started to cry. I wanted to see my brother again, I wanted to see Nancy, to tell her it was all right, that she didn't have to have that look

on her face anymore, that it wasn't her fault. But they wouldn't send me home."

"And so?"

"I became hysterical again, and the therapy began again. For a whole year I didn't speak. For another year I screamed. And then I became calm again."

"I understand. Do you know how old you are now?"

"I'm twenty-two years old."

"Very good. And do you know why you are here?"

"Therapy."

"Of course. But it is time to tell you more."

"More? What do you mean?"

"There are things you must know now; I believe you can learn now what really happened."

"What don't I know?"

"Are you calm?"

"Yes."

"You will remain calm? You will not begin to scream, or draw into yourself?"

"No, I won't scream."

"Very good. Listen carefully. Your governess did not hurt you."

"What?"

"It is time to remember; you must remember; your governess did not push you into the corn. Your brother did."

"No!"

"Your brother tried to kill you. He killed your governess after he blinded you, and you saw her die in the cornpatch before you lost your sight. Do you remember this?"

"I . . . oh, God . . . I was told . . ."

"Never mind what you were told. It is time to go back. You were told your governess was responsible for the accident because you could not handle what you saw. Your brother was taken away after the incident, and has spent his entire life in institutions. He is insane. He wanted to kill you that day out of jealousy for your attachment to your governess. He tried to kill you. Do you remember all of it now?"

"I . . . my God, yes . . ."

"Tell it to me."

"Oh my God."

"Tell it to me."

"I can't. I won't . . ."

"You must. Begin now, please."

"I —"

"Begin now."

"We . . . were roughhousing like I said, in that yellow field behind the house; it was cold . . . We were tumbling on the grass, moving closer to the corn field, and I remember that Nancy came out to tell us to stay away from the corn stalks. The day . . ."

"Yes?"

"The day smelled a lot like this one. There was the same smell in the air."

"Go on."

"My brother ignored her, and tumbled me closer to the corn; he was a bit older than I was and much bigger. The governess came over to scold him, and he laughed and deliberately pushed me into the corn, and those stalks came into my eyes . . ."

"Are you all right? Are you calm?"

". . . Yes."

"Good. Go on then."

"Nancy . . . ran over, and I felt her hands on my face, and she pulled them out of my eyes with that sucking sound . . ."

"Yes?"

"I . . . remember clearing away the blood, and I saw my brother . . . push Nancy down into the cornpatch, and he . . . got on top of her, weighing her down . . ."

"And then?"

"It's very difficult . . ."

"You must, as I said."

"He . . . was on top of her. He grabbed a husk of dried corn and began to . . . stab her in the face, in the eyes, and she screamed and screamed and . . ."

"You must go on."

"And the blood covered my eyes and I couldn't see any more, and I awoke in the hospital."

"Very good. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's . . . all . . ."

"You are all right?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm all right."

"You are calm?"

"Yes."

"Good. It is good that you remember these things."

"I can't believe I didn't remember!"

"You must be calm. It was necessary. You are calm now?"

"Yes."

"Good. There is something I must tell you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your brother has escaped from the institution he was in. That is why you were brought here."

"I—"

"Listen. Are you calm?"

"... Yes, I am calm."

"Good. Your brother will try to kill you. He wants to kill you. That is why you are here."

"I am safe?"

"That is why you are here. You will remain calm?"

"Yes."

"Good. There is something else I must tell you. Do you know where you are?"

"At another hospital, outside, on the grounds."

"That is not correct. Smell the air. Reach down and feel where you are. Do you know where you are?"

"I—"

"Yes, the corn. It is Autumn. Do you know who I am?"

"A doctor. Another doctor."

"I am your brother."

"Oh my G—"

RETAIL DISPLAY ALLOWANCE

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What was the big deal about being nice to a little old lady? After all, kindness was its own reward, wasn't it?

Water In A Teacup

by DICK STODGHILL

THE OLD LADY CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND HER and looked hesitatingly around the small restaurant. The jacket she wore had been fashionable in its day. Now it was frayed and tattered, like the loose-fitting dress that countless washings had faded to an unrecognizable hue. The hat that fit snugly over her gray hair dated back to the Flapper Era.

It was mid-afternoon so few of the tables were occupied. After a few seconds the old lady, who weighed no more than ninety pounds and stood only five feet even in thick-heeled shoes that had seen hard use, moved as quickly as she was able to a small table for two close to the wall. She carefully set a brown paper shopping bag on the floor next to a chair and sat down.

Three waitresses were on duty. Two of them immediately sized her up as a small tipper and busied themselves elsewhere. The third, Millie Thomason, was aware of what they were doing. She gave a little shrug and walked to the old lady's table. As she took a pencil and pad from an apron pocket she smiled automatically. After all, a smile didn't cost anything.

The old lady smiled back. "Just a cup of hot water, dearie." Her voice, like the rest of her, was brittle with age.

"Nothing else?"

The old lady shook her head. Again Millie shrugged imperceptibly and walked away. When she returned with the cup of water and a spoon, she waited half expectantly. When it became apparent that her duties had been fulfilled, Millie went back to her station and, turning, looked toward the table where the old lady was seated.

She had taken a folded paper napkin from a pocket of her jacket. She turned back the corners, revealing a tea bag that had already seen service on one or more occasions. The old lady picked it up and carefully placed it in the cup of hot water, jiggling it vigorously and then pressing the spoon against its side to squeeze out the last drop of goodness.

When it was obvious that nothing more would be forthcoming, the old lady removed the tea bag from the cup, placed it on the edge of the saucer and poured sugar from a glass container into the brew. She looked around the table hopefully but sighed when she saw there wasn't a pitcher of milk.

Millie Thomason smiled to herself. One of the other waitresses approached her, frowning. "Did you see what that old woman did?" she asked Millie. "Can you beat that for nerve?"

"So where's the harm?"

"Are you kidding? Fat lot of money we'd make with customers like her. If Mr. Subichan had seen it, he'd toss her out on her ear."

"Well he didn't see it."

The second waitress glared and walked away. Millie returned to watching the old lady. When her cup was empty she stood up, retrieved her shopping bag from beside the chair, smiled at Millie and departed. Millie cleared the table. The old lady hadn't left a tip.

SHE RETURNED AGAIN THE NEXT AFTERNOON. The routine was the same but this time Millie brought a small container of milk with the hot water. The old lady smiled gratefully. "Thank you, dearie."

In the days that followed the old lady continued to appear promptly at three o'clock. When time allowed, Millie would sit down and chat for a minute or two and the old lady seemed to enjoy that even more than her tea. The other patrons, and their number seemed to be increasing as time went on, watched attentively, feeling the afternoon interlude was both amusing and heart warming. The feeling was not shared by the two waitresses who worked with Millie.

"What do you talk to her about?" asked the one who first had voiced an objection to the old lady's presence.

Millie smiled and said, "Oh, things."

The other waitress shook her head agitatedly. "When Mr. Subichan finds out, you'll both be sorry."

But Mr. Subichan already knew. A shrewd businessman despite his limited knowledge of the English language, he had noticed a steady increase in the daily receipts over the past weeks. A look at the waitresses order blanks, which he carefully filed away, revealed that a mid-afternoon flurry of business was responsible. Curious as to why a usually quiet period of the day suddenly had become lucrative, Mr. Subichan inquired of a cook and was told the story. He correctly deduced that people were coming to see the old lady who brought her own tea bag.

Millie's co-workers grinned knowingly at each other the day Mr. Subichan departed from his habit of going home to rest during the afternoon lull. But they were disappointed. Rather than hitting the roof as they expected when the daily ritual took place, he looked on approvingly. A little milk and sugar was a small price to pay for the increased profits from those who came to watch.

AND SO THINGS WENT ON AS BEFORE. But the old lady, frail from the beginning, seemed to grow steadily less sturdy and more sickly. Still she continued to come, obviously more because of Millie's companionship than the tea, which often remained untouched until Millie would gently prod her into drinking it, saying she needed the nourishment.

"But nothing tastes good lately," the old lady would complain. "Even the tea seems bitter."

Millie would pat her hand and say, "Add a little more sugar."

No one, least of all the doctor, was surprised when the old lady collapsed one day on the sidewalk in front of a free clinic two blocks from the restaurant. She was carried inside, examined briefly by the doctor who had been seeing her almost daily for a month, and pronounced dead.

While her death came as no shock to the doctor, he was stunned when, for no particular reason, a nurse began poking around in the old lady's shopping bag and soon was pulling out wads of crumpled ten- and twenty-dollar bills. The police were called and by the time they arrived the pile of money, which by then included fifties and hundreds, totaled more than \$40,000.

A death certificate was duly signed by the doctor and the body taken away by an undertaker whose original reluctance to make a pickup at the free clinic vanished quickly when he was told of the contents of the shopping bag.

The police immediately sealed off the old lady's untidy room in a shabby hotel nearby. After a night of steady work by four officers who sorted through stacks of old newspapers page-by-page as well as searching countless other potential hiding places, it was announced that an additional \$50,000 in cash had been discovered along with stocks and bonds valued at several hundred thousand.

THE STORY WAS ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE MORNING paper. At nine o'clock a lawyer appeared at police headquarters, told those in charge a number of things about the old lady and then produced a will dated only a month earlier. The story in the afternoon paper contained even more human interest than the first; the old lady had left everything to a waitress named Millie Thomason, the one person who had befriended her.

Mr. Subichan watched nervously as a horde of reporters, photographers and television crews descended on the restaurant. Until the first arrived neither he nor Millie knew the old lady had died.

His initial resentment that only Millie was named in the will was forgotten by Mr. Subichan as he posed with her for countless photographs and gave out statement after statement assuring everyone that the only reward he either wanted or expected was the satisfaction of having helped make an old lady's final weeks a little happier. Eventually he came to believe it himself.

The other waitresses, however, made no attempt to conceal their anger. A policy of sharing tips had been established long ago and did this not in a sense qualify as a tip? Millie, when confronted with the idea between interviews, smiled and shook her head. No, she told them without hesitation, it did not.

AFTER TWO HOURS OF STEADY QUESTIONING, posing for photographs and looking into the eyes of television cameras, Millie excused herself and walked to the employees' restroom, locking the door behind her. She opened her purse and as she did so, the smile that soon would appear in newspapers and on TV screens across the country beamed back at her from the mirror.

After all, thought Millie, she had been kind to the old lady. Certainly no one else had. She reached in the purse, pushing aside a travel folder extolling the virtues of life on the Cote d'Azur, and extracted a small vial containing a powdery white substance. It had done its job well, even more effectively and quickly than Millie had hoped. Still smiling, she gave it a final look of gratitude before flushing it away forever. ●

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Edward Goldstein, Publisher

*It's the old badger game, with ex-chorus cutie
Wrinkles Riley luring the sucker into the hotel room.
So what could go wrong? Don't ask!*

The Pigeon Pluckers

by ARTHUR MOORE

ME AND LEFT FOOT HAMISH ARE SO FAR DOWN on our luck we are eating hand-me-down corn flakes. We are even bumming beans and bagels from Bindle. Bindle is a mooch-master and past president of the Panhandler's Procuring Profession. He can spot a phony come-on faster than a loan shark figuring interest with a stiletto.

Of course Left Foot has always been seedy. He is so used to being

poor that he has never owned a wallet. He carries his pennies in a beanbag.

When we arrive at Katzie's Saloon, Blue Sky Conners is perched on a stool, elaborating to Jonesy. Blue Sky cannot talk; he orates, eloquates and vocalizes. He is a handsome con type who is all schmaltz and a smile wide. As we shuffle in, stepping carefully so as not to curl the cardboard in our shoes, he is practising his patter and parading his personality — it shouldn't be a privation just to purchase a pilsner. He is holding forth on his favorite fleece, *grift a la gimmick*.

Jonesy, the bartender, is soaking up the swindle and springing for free foam, drooling in the drivel of Blue Sky's dulcet dialogue. But he scowls at us and wriggles his skimpy moustache because he knows we are flatter than the shadow of a shrunken dime.

"Set 'em up for my pals, Jonesy," Blue Sky says, bestowing a banknote on the bar. He helps Left Foot up to the brew and Jonesy rolls his eyes and sighs. Left Foot gives a glad little smile and clutches the stein, it shouldn't turn out to be nothing but a frothy dream.

"It is a happy fact," Blue Sky orates, "that the old grifts turn the best green gifts. True, the gold brick is gone, but the shell game remains. A buck is still to be boosted from the very cats who cleave and cluster about that complexity of the age, the computer."

"Izzat so?" Jonesy says.

"They are not programmed to spot a shill or smell a switch. These are the schleps who think the badger game is a movie by Disney."

"Ain't it?" asks Left Foot.

"It is a long, profitable pasture," says Blue Sky, making it sound reasonable. He beams on us, the good honest smile of a real crook, and downs the lager.

I AND LEFT FOOT DROOP ON THE BAR long after Blue Sky has sailed with the tide. If only I could work a con. The rent is due, my stomach is growling, and I am badgering my brain. Which is what I am doing when a thought blunders in.

When it shows up, I say, "I got it!" very loud. And Left Foot falls off the stool.

"I allus knew you had it, Dubois," Jonesy says, glowering at me. "I am only sorry you hadda bring it in here."

"Lissen," I say, ignoring him. "Why don't me and Left Foot work the badger dodge on a lonely likely local?"

"Such as who?" Left Foot asks, nursing his empty stein.

"Aaaaaaa, you got to have a doll for that," Jonesy sneers. "How you going to lure the sucker up to the room otherwise?"

That stumps me. I look at Left Foot, but it does not seem possible that I could dress him and primp him with female finery to lure anything human or male. He attracts flies, that is about all.

"Anyway, Faceless Robert won't like it," Jonesy says.

He means that Faceless wants a cut of any slick, sly schemes sired in his section of town. I reflect that Faceless and Digger Doyle are on the outs. I mention that Faceless is so busy slinking and sniping that he will never notice a quiet con around the corner.

"Maybe," Jonesy muses, while Left Foot listens with his mouth open. "Maybe, but you still gotta have a doll." He wriggles the moustache. "Say . . . how 'bout Wrinkles Riley? She's a good customer of mine, and a ex-chorus cutie."

"Would she do it?" I ask.

"She is the only broad in town who would fall for a weak pitch like this here one." He looks at the clock on the wall. "It's about time for her daily dram of barley broth. When she comes in, let me front for you, Dubois. You could not talk your way outa a double-breasted pizza."

He is wound up so I say all right. I give in to fact, but I do not have to fancy it. I am remembering Wrinkles. She is an ugly duckling and was brought into the world by a quack. She is female, but only slightly more so than a tugboat.

When she shows up I see that she is shaped like a fine violin, only her neck is longer. "Gimme a beer, Jonesy," she hollers and kicks the bar, giving Left Foot a leer at the same time.

I have instant doubts. She is soft and cuddly as a bottle of horseradish, but she does not have its healthy color. Her curves are very corpulent because of the cord about her corset. It cuts her into two large chunks. She was in the chorus when Benedict Arnold headlined with his canary act. Jonesy slides the suds under her sniffer and lays the plan on her. Right away she frowns at me and Left Foot and shakes her frowsy head.

It takes five lagers to convince her, and by that time her eyes do not focus.

"Wrinkles is in," Jonesy informs us, "and you can use her room at the Humber Hotel. That's where Digger Doyle lives, and not in Faceless' territory."

"Only because Faceless and Digger is on the outs," she says. "Otherwise us badgers is bums." She weaves around and looks crosseyed at Left Foot. "Kiss me, you funny fool."

"With my plan and your looks," I say to her with confidence, "we can't lose."

Jonesy nods sadly. "Yeah, you two are a pair." He helps me pull Left Foot out from under the bar.

THE NEXT DAY WE RUN THROUGH THE BIT REAL SLOW and careful, using a box brownie that Jonesy has supplied. It is important that Left Foot does not later louse up the lurk.

The plan is that Wrinkles will use her wiles to waltz a pigeon to her pad at the Humber. Then me and Left Foot will charge in, snap a photo, and shake down said Mark for his final fin. This is the old badger game. It is also blackmail, and it is foolproof — in the dry runs.

In a couple of hours we have got it all down perfect, and everyone knows what to do, so we decide to put the show on the road that night.

Wrinkles takes extra long at the powder and paint, she should lure good. She even mixes in a little library paste and some plastic wood. Then she sits in Katzie's under a busted bulb.

But she still looks like a careworn iguana.

Me and Left Foot play solitaire in the back room and keep an eye on prospects through the peep hole. She does not catch a cold. There are plenty of fish sniffing at the bait, but when they do, Wrinkles smiles and the paint flakes off.

It is after midnight before one bleary-eyed sucker lurches at the line. Wrinkles combs the hair over her face and leads the souse to be sheared.

Jonesy runs in, yelling at us, very excited. Left Foot whimpers and drops the camera; he pulls at my coat and cries that he don't want to do it. I have to march him out to the street and shake him which makes him cringe. He is easily frightened. When there is an emergency he is afraid to break the glass.

He is wearing the camera around his neck and is checked out on its operation. He no longer looks in the lens when he takes a picture. I march him to the Humber Hotel and we stand on the sidewalk and watch Wrinkle's room light go on. She has a corner room.

The worst part is waiting ten minutes while she gets the Mark in a suitable state for a glossy eight by ten.

"Let's go," I say when the time is up. I have to drag Left Foot into the elevator because he is beginning to stutter and stammer in a choppy way. He has got stage fright at the last minute.

We take the elevator to the third floor, and Left Foot doesn't want to get out. I yank him out because I am also nervous. He keeps talking and jabbering about the second floor until I shut him up. In front of the corner door I hiss at him to start snapping as soon as we get inside the room and he nods, very unhappily.

Then I turn the doorknob and we both rush inside.

We have created a sensation. There are two people in the room and neither of them is wearing enough to cover a wily wink. Both of them gulp and stare at us with eyes the size of subpoenas. I have never seen either of them before.

But I can hear Left Foot clicking away. Then the parties of the second part begin to scream. The male squawker is very big and large, and mostly blind. He is yelling and shouting that some creep has hid his cheaters. The woman is shrilling that we should clear out — which I recognize as good advice. The big guy is liable to find his glasses any second.

I run over Left Foot getting out the door, and when I go back for him she throws him in my face. It is a very sleazy scene.

TWO DAYS LATER FACELESS ROBERT EASES into Katzie's Saloon and shifty-eyes the joint. Jonesy points us out in a hurry, of course. Faceless comes over and chews his matchstick at us. Left Foot clutches my arm in terror, and I am wondering what I have said about Faceless, in public.

"Dubois, little pal," Faceless says with his usual snarl. "You bazoos have done me like a favor and I want you should know I am grateful. You can come to the club and watch Gloria's number, for free."

"G-gee, t-t-thanks, Faceless."

"Jonesy give me them pitchers you guys took."

"Y-yeah?" I stare at Jonesy, but he is polishing the bar and straining his ears.

"Digger Doyle has left town on account of you."

"He d-d-d-did?" My mouth falls open like Left Foot's. I do not bother to close it. It would only fall open again.

Faceless says, "Yeah," and he is making a sort of grating noise behind the matchstick. It is like two broken cogs grinding together, which is the closest he ever comes to laughing. "Like I say, I am grateful. The guy you took the pitchers of is Squinty Sam, Digger's right hand man. I sent them pitchers to Digger."

"D-D-Digger's?"

"Without him, Digger ain't got no mob."

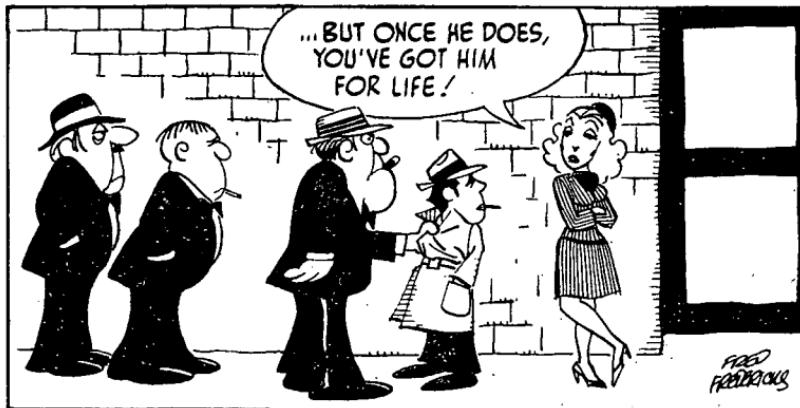
I do not understand why that makes a difference, but Faceless is still making the funny grinding noise. "Digger has left town, chasing Squinty Sam."

"B-but"

"Because of the dame," Faceless says. "That was Digger's wife."

Mike Shamus

by FRED FREDERICKS



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The Fat Man disliked mewling types who blurted all they knew immediately and then screamed their lives away. This woman promised something better before the look in her dark eyes changed from furious contempt to sick fear!

Pressure

by DAN J. MARLOWE

THE FAT MAN HAD BEEN SUMMONED TO THE PRISON from his bed. Perspiration glistened upon his jowly features and bald head from the summer night's humidity. The stubble of his beard showed a silvery tint as he sat at his desk. The door of his office was lettered CHIEF OF POLITICAL POLICE.

Draped across a corner of the desk were a dress, a slip, a brassiere, a pair of panties, and a pair of long black stockings. Each garment was partially shredded, indicating forcible removal. "A fine catch," the Fat Man said approvingly to his Aide. "An excellent catch."

"Yes, sir," the Aide said modestly. "Shall I let the General know, sir?"

The Fat Man's small eyes almost disappeared completely as he frowned. "I will let the General know," he said stiffly. He reached for the telephone on his desk. "Sir," he began after he had waited for his call to be passed through a secretary and an orderly, "I wouldn't wake you at this time of night except that I have good news. I have the wife of the opposition leader in my hands here." He listened. "Yes, sir. I estimate that in —" he glanced at his watch "— three hours we'll be surrounding the place where her husband is hiding.", He listened again. "No, sir, no slipups," he promised. He chuckled confidently. "I guarantee it with my own life, sir."

He replaced the telephone receiver and nodded at his Aide. "The General was most complimentary," he said.

"Yes, sir," the Aide replied. He was a much younger man with a trim mustache. He nodded at a tiny vial of colorless liquid on the desk

beside the clothing. "That was sewed into a seam of the brassiere," he said. "I worked it out without breaking the thread."

"Ahh, yes," the Fat Man murmured. "They all carry the poison, but not two percent of them use it. Well —" he hoisted his moist bulk to his feet "— we'll give this pigeon another chance. The bottle-of-wine gambit should do it."

He picked up the vial, opened it, and poured the poison into his wastebasket. He carried the vial to the watercooler where he rinsed it out several times. He refilled the vial with water, recapped it as he brought it back to the desk, searched out the hidden seam in the brassiere, and deftly worked the vial back into place, again without breaking the thread.

"When I give her back her clothing, she'll think we missed it," he said. "You put her in my private cell?"

"Yes, sir."

The Fat Man turned to a wooden rack on a low table against the wall and removed a bottle of dark red wine from it. He selected a wine glass from the shelf below it, picked up all of the clothing from the desk and tossed it over one arm, then left his office and walked down the corridor, carrying clothing, wine bottle, and glass.

THE WOMAN, NAKED, RETREATED TO THE FARTHEST corner of the detention cell when he unlocked the heavy door and entered. The Fat Man dropped the clothing in the center of the earthen floor, then placed the wine glass on the floor beside the clothing. He uncorked the bottle with an opener he removed from a pocket, and set the bottle down alongside the glass.

"You are one of the unfortunates doomed to die in pain, my dear," he said to the woman. "But we are not barbarians. You have ten minutes. Most use it to pray. Some drink." He nodded at the bottle. "As a frequent observer, I can tell you that in the end it seems to make little difference. Make your own preparations as you see fit, but when I return, know that you will tell me where to find your husband."

She cursed him, fluently, and he really looked at her for the first time. She was plain in looks but young and full-bodied. Scratches under her breasts and on her belly indicated that she had already been roughly used. He could see that she was still defiant, though. This questioning could be interesting. He disliked the mewling types who blurted all they knew immediately and then despairingly screamed their lives away. This one promised something better before the look in her dark eyes changed from furious contempt to sick fear.

He left the cell, locking the door carefully. He hummed a little tune

during the short walk back to his office. "The General will surely order promotions for us all when we hand him the opposition leader," he said to his Aide as he again settled himself behind his desk. He smiled broadly. "The woman will find the vial and think she has the means at hand to cheat us of our sport, as well as to protect her husband. People react predictably under pressure. She will pour herself a glass of wine and empty the contents of the vial into it, then wait, hoping against hope —"

"Until she hears your key in the lock of the cell door again," the Aide agreed.

"Exactly. She will gulp down the wine, then crumple from her total disillusionment when she realizes there was no poison to effect her release. I find it psychologically interesting that after that letdown they can never screw themselves up again to withstand the — ah — questioning successfully for any length of time."

He folded his hands over the bulge of his belly while he waited.

THE FAT MAN WALKED DOWN THE CORRIDOR AGAIN with the Aide two paces behind him. He unlocked the cell door and threw it open; stood motionless for an instant, then plunged inside. A smothered sound escape his suddenly dry lips. The Aide could see the clothed figure of the woman in the farthest corner of the cell. She was on the floor, her face blue and her outflung limbs distorted.

The Fat Man's round, sweaty face had turned white with shock. "You — you saw me dump the poison!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "You *saw* me!" His voice soared as the enormity of his situation burst upon him. "We've already notified the General — there's no way we can cover up now." Panic threaded his voice as he glared at the woman's body. "She must have had a heart attack! She *must* have!"

The Aide knelt and picked up the half-empty wine glass from the floor. He sniffed at it gingerly.

"Fool!" the Fat Man blared at him. "She had no poison! It was a locked cell! I had the only key! I tell you she had a heart attack!" He reached down and snatched the wine glass from the Aide's hand, spilling more of its contents, then raised the glass to his lips and drained it in a swallow. "Imbecile, do you think I don't know what I'm talking about? The woman —" he paused as his voice hoarsened. He looked down at the glass in his hand, then clutched at his throat.

His mouth opened and closed, but nothing emerged except a bleating sound. The glass fell from his hand. His face turned gray, then red, then mottled. He took a faltering step toward the door but then sank to his knees. The unnoticed wine glass crunched under his weight.

Both hands were gripping his throat. He groaned once before he toppled onto his side, his legs kicking spasmodically.

The Aide watched dispassionately.

People *did* react predictably under pressure, he reflected.

He returned to the Fat Man's office when the leg-twitching ceased.

His own office, now.

THE GENERAL WAS SURE TO APPOINT THE AIDE to succeed his deceased chief when the tragedy was discovered.

He had only to remove from his desk the hypodermic needle with which he had forced the prussic acid through the corks into the bottles of wine, and take the remaining bottles with him when he left the office.

He stopped in the corridor when he saw the sergeant-leader of the General's bodyguards standing with his back against the closed door of the Fat Man's office. "Yes?" the Aide said in a voice turned suddenly uncertain.

The hawk-like visage of the bodyguard was rock-like as he opened the door and waved the Aide inside. The Aide complied reluctantly. He was having trouble with his breathing. How could the General have suspected anything?

"Ahh, there," the General said genially as the door closed behind the Aide. "I understand you were the one who brought her in? An excellent piece of work."

"Thank you, sir," the Aide said, relaxing. Was it possible that this disaster could be salvaged? But then the general moved aside, and the Aide's eyes bulged when he saw the opened bottle of wine on the desk top and the trio of wine glasses aligned in front of it.

"Your superior is — ahh — busy?" the General inquired.

The Aide swallowed. "He's — he's with her now," he stammered.

"I believe I'll look in on that session myself," the General said. "But first a toast to a job well done." He poured wine into two of the glasses, then handed one to the Aide who almost dropped it. "Confusion to our enemies," the General toasted before he took a long swallow.

The Aide watched in horror while the familiar ritual was enacted. In falling, the General struck the desk heavily, making a loud noise before he landed on the floor, distorted face upward.

The office door opened immediately and the bodyguard-leader looked in. "What —" he began, then charged forward.

The Aide was barely able to raise his own glass hurriedly and drink from it.

Holding the kid by the neck, Clay got out the illegal billy club and whacked him across the kidneys. He didn't even consider calling for help. If he couldn't handle these clowns, it was time to hang it up.
Besides, why cut the pie?

Chop Shop

by MIKE TAYLOR

CLAY FONTAC SHIFTED HIS CONSIDERABLE WEIGHT AROUND on the rump-sprung seat and aimed the old Buick down the umpteenth double row of parked cars. It was a quarter past nine at night and the huge St. James Mall parking lot was still jammed.

The center's big mercury vapor lamps glistened off rain-wet pavement and acres of waxed and polished cars, their shiny surfaces beaded with moisture. Clay let the Buick creep along in low, flicking his gaze from side to side, alert for any unusual activity.

The stolen car racket had become epidemic in the western suburbs, particularly around the new shopping malls. St. James was losing twenty cars a week; popular, expensive, late models whose parts were in big demand. Patrols by the municipal police were something less than effective. When a local TV station started raising a fuss, the mall management got back a little positive publicity by hiring a few off-duty cops in unmarked cars to cover the parking lot during peak periods. Enter Officer Clay Fontac, seventeen years on the force and still hurting for money — wasn't that a crock?

You'd think by the time a guy turned forty-five he wouldn't have to work a second job. In fact, his finances had been in pretty good shape until eighteen months ago, when the old lady started having those

kidney problems. Half a dozen trips to the hospital, dialysis treatments, finally ending up with the transplant operation last March. They told him how lucky she was, how rarely donors were located so soon. Sure. But the cruddy insurance hadn't been nearly enough.

Clay deeply resented his wife since the illness. It had destroyed his retirement plans, left him buried in debt with little hope of recovery before he was sixty. Things would have been better if the old bat had just died, he reflected sourly. At least the life insurance would have covered the costs

HE CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF MOVEMENT IN THE SHADOWS alongside the Famous store. It was the highest location in the mall — a good place for a lookout. Clay cut the lights and tromped on the gas. The car roared across the open space at the end of the lot.

The figure in the shadows, a skinny kid in a nylon windbreaker, heard it coming. He stared around wildly, saw the huge grill bearing down on him. As Clay had expected, he froze just long enough.

Clay braked at the last second, nearly pinning the boy to the wall. He was out of the car and had him by the scruff of the neck before he knew what was what. Clay spun him around and mashed his face against the stucco wall. The kid sagged.

Clay patted him down, felt the bulge in the jacket pocket. He pulled the object out and snorted. It was a Radio Shack walkie-talkie. He smashed it under his heel.

“All right, punk, where are they?”

“Huh?”

“The others, you little runt. The ones you’re playing lookout for while they rip off cars. C’mon!”

“You’re crazy. I wasn’t doin’ nuthin’.”

Still holding the kid by the neck, Clay got out the illegal rubber billy and whacked him across the kidneys. It only took a couple of shots.

“East side! East side!” he babbled. “By the Penney’s auto store. Stop! Please!”

Clay grinned and turned him around. He was spitting blood and the left side of his face was raw. Uneasiness touched Clay. Last week he had made a mistake, pounded on the wrong kid. That one was still in the hospital, with a concussion and a ruptured spleen. The little smartass had *looked* like a car thief; how was he to know? There would be a stink, though, if the kid ever identified him. He shrugged. This time he had the genuine article.

“C’mon, sonny boy. Let’s go see your friends.” Clay cuffed him and hustled him into the suicide seat, slammed the door.

HE DROVE SLOWLY ALONG THE OUTSIDE PERIMETER of the lot, keeping an eye out. Behind Penney's he spotted a group of kids half-way down the next row of cars. Four or five of them were clustered on the driver's side of one of the new, small Lincolns, jiving and talking. It was obvious to the experienced eye that they were shielding the activities of somebody behind them.

He eased the car to a stop and watched as they popped the door. It would have been a simple matter to jump out and break them up, maybe even bust a couple if he was lucky, but a different sort of approach had been stirring in Clay's mind.

It was becoming obvious that these car thefts were the work of a large, well-organized ring. It followed there was a chop shop somewhere in the area, a garage or warehouse where dismantling the vehicles and distribution of the parts was handled. If he could tail this bunch of punks and locate their base of operations . . . it might mean a little reward, not to mention publicity which could propel him toward those elusive sergeant's stripes.

The one who had been working on the door stood up suddenly. Clay's eyes narrowed. Even in the bad light he recognized the tall, angular frame topped by a huge blond Afro. Waldo Fells. Waldo was a suspect in several large scale fencing operations; he had also been peripherally involved in another chop shop they had closed down last year. Clay had questioned him after numerous pickups. Nothing. He was tough, pleasantly whimsical, and wore a perpetual sneer. A born ringleader.

Ah, yes, he knew young Mr. Fells well. Clay recalled a session in a back room at the precinct, the only chance he'd had to introduce the creep to his latex persuader. In ten minutes Waldo was quivering like a jello salad, but Clay had been unable to wipe away that sneer. From that moment on there was nobody he wanted more.

The boys had hotwired the car by now and were piling in, preparatory to taking off. The whole thing had taken less than two minutes. He drove to the end of the row and waited for them. Seconds later they came out with a squeal of tires. Clay wondered about the lookout, but they went straight to an exit. Apparently he had his own wheels.

The rest was a cinch. The Lincoln's taillights were distinctive enough to stand out easily in the flow of traffic.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER THEY WERE IN A RURAL AREA just across the county line. Clay dropped back to half a mile, but by then traffic was sparse enough to present no problem. There was a CB

under the dash, but he didn't even consider calling for assistance. If he couldn't handle these clowns, it was time to hang it up. Why cut the pie?

The Lincoln turned off the highway into a narrow road that ran back to a large, block-shaped building. A door rolled up and the car disappeared inside. Clay parked on the shoulder.

The kid was huddled against the door, whimpering softly. No trouble there. Clay opened the glove compartment, got out the .38 and a roll of masking tape. He checked the cuffs, ripped off a strip of tape and slapped it across the kid's mouth.

"You behave, now, you hear?"

Shoving the gun in his belt, he got out of the car and walked up the road. The rain had dropped off to a fine mist.

The building looked like an abandoned warehouse. The nearest structures were two hundred yards away. He moved cautiously, alert for an outside guard, but there was no sign of one.

Like many big men Clay was surprisingly light on his feet. He glided through the shadows alongside the building, searching for an entrance. He found it about halfway down the side, a standard wooden door, locked, which yielded quickly to the small bar he always carried on his belt.

Slipping inside, he snapped on a tiny hooded penlight for an instant. He was in a long corridor that ran parallel to the warehouse wall. He had an impression of several doorways spaced along the inside wall.

Operating in the dark, he moved slowly down the hall, locating each door by touch and testing it. These were metal and all were locked. He had been at this about five minutes when light spilled into the corridor as a door opened somewhere behind him. Voices echoed.

Tiptoeing like a cartoon caricature, Clay hurried down the corridor, racing to stay in the shadows. Damn! They were coming in his direction.

He was on the verge of drawing his revolver and turning to confront them. Without much hope he tried the next door in line. To his surprise it swung inward. He ducked inside.

Clay found himself in one corner of a huge, poorly lighted space that must have taken up ninety percent of the building. It was the heart of the operation.

Cutting torches flared as half a dozen men worked at dismantling two cars. One was the Lincoln. Stacks of fenders, bumpers, hoods, motors, transmissions, seats covered the concrete floor. The air stank of acetylene and scorched metal.

Clay slid along the wall to his left, using a large pile of tires for

cover. He didn't see Waldo, but a couple of the workers were from the bunch at the mall. Judging from the size of the stacks, this looked like a major distribution point.

The door he had just come through opened to admit Waldo and two cronies. Clay scooted further along the wall. He counted nine people; too many to handle while they were all spread out. He needed a different vantage point.

A few more feet and he came upon another door. Metal and chilly to the touch. Clay tried it and found it unlocked. Why not? With a backwards glance at the room he eased it open, stepped inside, and shut it quickly behind him.

Cripes, it was cold!

Pitch black and a strange waxy smell. It reminded him of — a meat locker? Clay dug out his penlight, clicked it on, and barely stifled a scream.

He stared in total disbelief at the dozens of frozen, polyethylene wrapped shapes suspended from ceiling pipes around the room. Then the lights came on and, at the same instant, something thwacked brutally across the back of his head. The frost was cold against his face as he hit the floor.

SOMEBODY WAS PRYING OPEN HIS RIGHT EYE and shining a painfully bright light into it. Clay shuddered, groaned, tried to sit up. Restraining straps held him down on a narrow table.

Vision slowly returned. Waldo Fells' pocked face swam into focus, grinning from ear to ear.

"Greetings, greetings, Officer Fontac. Relax, please. So good to see you. What a fine job of tailing."

Clay's tongue felt like wadded cotton. "What — what the hell are you doing?" he mumbled.

"Taking care of old debts, my man. I want you to meet the doc. He's like our technical advisor." A little man with a wispy mustache stepped into view. Beside him was the lookout, his face scraped and bloody, eyes full of hate. "And you know Bernie, of course. Now, is everybody ready?"

"That locker," Clay grated. "The bodies were *human*. You're not —?" He couldn't finish the question. He recalled his wife's transplant, the miracle donor. "No!"

"Why, sure." Waldo giggled, brandishing a huge, gleaming cleaver. "We're in the parts business, right? Now we're just branching out."

Chop.

Mike's Mail



MOONLIGHTING

All authors of stories, please do not write of the moon. You usually are wrong in its phases. In the October issue, Brett Halliday: "Full lambent moon in starry sky." Could not be lambent (hidden) in starry sky. The same night he writes of a "Gibbous Moon" page 10, paragraph 3. A gibbous moon is an oval moon! Please leave moons alone; it distracts from the story. Once we read of a "new" moon coming *up* in the East! Think that over! Had to be an "old" moon.

L. Beaufreire,
Honolulu, Hawaii

According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, lambent means softly bright or radiant, and marked by lightness or brilliance, so it sounds to me like we could have a full lambent moon. But a gibbous one; you're certainly right about that. Gibbous means swollen on one side, having a hump; seen with

more than half but not all of the apparent disk illuminated. I guess we can't have both. Brett Halliday must've been out in the sun too long the day he wrote that!

MYSTERY MYSTIQUE

Having a hard time locating your fine magazine on the racks. I decided I had better subscribe rather than miss any issue.

I do tend to get a little peeved with some of your readers when they tend to bemoan weak story lines, petty inconsistencies, etc. To me, reading is a way to lose oneself in the mystique and aura of unreality and unconventionality. Want exact facts, stick with non-fiction. Want to relax and enjoy yourself, stick with fiction — one of the best being Mike Shayne.

Judy Wilbur
3806 Chestnut Dr. W.
Holiday, Florida 33590

Basically, I think you're right, but there's no harm in being accurate, too. Subscribing is the best way, of course, but some of you would rather pick up MSMM on the stands, so I'd suggest you threaten your local magazine dealer with mayhem if he doesn't stock MSMM every month.

PULP FAN

Sorry that this letter is a little late, but then I rarely get things done on time. I want to comment on the pulp feature that you have been running in Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine.

I love it. It is the only reason that I have purchased the magazine. I usually do not care for detective or mystery stories. So I have stayed away from your magazine as well as the others. However, I heard about you going to have some Frank Hamilton drawings in the magazine. I eagerly awaited the March issue. I was not disappointed. The Hamilton drawing was magnificent. The Michael Avallone comment was nicely done. It was a personal remembrance. I waited for the April issue, but it did not have the pulp feature. So I did not purchase that issue. But then every month there was some pulp character. Happily I bought every

issue up to September. Then nothing. I am sad. I guess you have just lost a new customer. I am sure that Frank Hamilton has many more pictures of the pulp characters. Why not continue to use them?

As a matter of fact, why not use some new stories using the old pulp characters? The copyright has run out on some of the characters. You might even use some of the old authors who are still around and would love to do new stories. If not, there are some fans such as Will Murray and Joseph Lewandowski and Dafydd Dyer who would be delighted to write some stories.

The only other thing that I can comment about in your magazine is the cover illustrations. The best one was the one for August. The almost symbolic drawing of a face in terror was very well done.

Very impressive. The November cover was well done but not enough to make me buy the magazine. I suppose that I like the March cover with the dead girl on target.

So get back to pulp-related material and make me want to buy your magazine again.

Albert & Louise Tonik
3341 Jeffrey Drive
Dresher, PA 19025

I used to write for the pulps in the early fifties when they were phasing out (I was just a kid at the time!), and I loved them then and love them now. Apparently, there are a lot of fans out there, and not just the old timers, but some of the new timers who are discovering this fascinating literature. How about some of you other MSMM readers commenting on this.

COUNSELOR AT LAW

I have just read "Counselor at Law" in the September issue. Elsewhere you state that the story was turned down by other magazines as not being in the public interest. Perhaps it might have been turned down for other reasons.

I first read this story thirty or forty years ago but do not now remember where. It was first published as a real incident in the life of a famous East Coast criminal lawyer. I believe the lawyer was Red Fallon, but am not quite sure.

At any rate, according to the real life story, one morning a very agitated bank teller appeared at the lawyer's office and told a tearful tale of having embezzled \$10,000 from the bank where he was employed and was fearful of being exposed by bank examiners. After some lawyer-client conversation, the lawyer instructed the teller to go to the bank and put \$30,000 in a brief case and return the money to him. The teller did so.

The lawyer then called the bank and told its president that he had a client who had embezzled \$40,000 from his bank; that he could recover \$20,000, the rest having been spent, and return it to the bank if the bank would agree not to prosecute. The bank's president almost had apoplexy and sputtered a refusal. A short time later, however, the president called and related that the bank's board of directors had agreed to the proposition. The lawyer then returned \$20,000 to the bank and pocketed \$10,000 as an earned fee. This caper happened circa 1920 and, of course, would not fly this day and time.

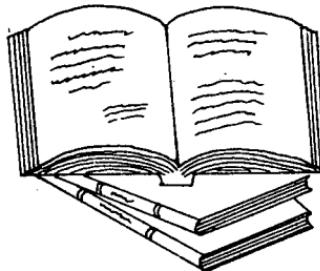
Moreover, according to the story, as part of the conditions, Fallon, if indeed it was he, suggested to the bank, with some pressure, that it give the teller a letter of recommendation in order that he could obtain employment elsewhere. It did.

Lowell E. Branum
Attorney at Law
900 First National Bank Bldg.
Midland, Texas 79701

I doubt that an editor would reject a story because something similar happened forty to sixty years ago. But then, editors are a strange, illogical, unpredictable breed. Ask any of the MSMM writers. They know!

Got something you'd like to say to Mike, the authors, the editor, the publisher, other readers, the world in general? Write to: **Mike's Mail, MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Renown Publications, P.O. Box 178, Reseda, CA 91335.** Let's hear from you!

Stiff Competition



BOOK REVIEWS

by **JOHN BALL**

Jack Olsen, who is a new author to us, has produced a magnificent book which mixes high suspense with a thoroughly realistic police procedural. Furthermore, he writes like an angel. The work is called *Missing Persons*, and it is an eyeball burner from the first page to the last. When an unsuccessful artist's wife vanishes, and the police do not seem to be too much help, he goes in search of her himself. Meanwhile Sergeant Johnny Boon, who handles homicides for a city that is presumably Seattle, finds that his own estranged wife is gone. So is a retarded boy. Add a lady cop who knows her job and a cop hating female judge to the cast and you have the ingredients of this very superior work. The artist, in particular, emerges as a remarkable human being whose love for his wife drives him to the limits and beyond. A strong candidate for the Edgar. (Atheneum, \$12.95)



When *True Confessions* by John Gregory Dunne first appeared in hardback, we gave it a strong recommendation. It tells the story of two brothers, one a priest, the other a cop, who become involved in a homicide case obviously taken from the still unsolved murder of the "Black Dahlia," Elizabeth Ann Short. Now a film has been made and released and the book is available in paperback from Pocket Books for \$3.50. The language is very strong, but it fits perfectly into its era, and realism comes sharply home on every page. Unless you have a weak stomach and side with the rigid reformers, don't miss this one.



Another very fine suspense novel is William Beechcroft's *Position of Ultimate Trust*. In this exceptionally well written book the pressure never lets up. An agency within the government (not the CIA) is being manipulated to kill the President so that the Vice President, who has different ideas, can take over. The idea is to blow his fishing boat out of the water in Florida, where most of the action takes place. The plot is complex, but it is all clearly set out and the reader is never bogged down. There is a professional hit man in this one that will freeze your blood. Highly recommended. (Dodd Mead, \$8.95)



For those who mourn the passing of Miss Marple, elderly Margaret Binton of New York may help to fill the gap. She and a group of New York kids start a little truck garden on a fenced vacant lot in Manhattan. Some robbery loot is buried along with their seeds and murder is done. You can read all about it in *A Ragged Plot* by Richard Barth. The net result is a pleasant entertainment that does not aspire to be anything more. (The Dial Press, \$10.95)



If pure deduction is your thing, then you won't want to miss the unexpectedly-titled *Roast Eggs* by Douglas Clark. The plot idea is most unusual. In England a man stands accused of murder. His trial is well advanced and he has made a fine impression on the jury. Over the week end, before the trial concludes, two Scotland Yard specialists

go over the evidence against him. Through some skillful and very close reasoning they come up with a whole new hypothesis by fitting together tiny fragments of evidence that have passed almost unnoticed (although they are all given to the reader). This appears to be a first novel; if this is indeed the case, it must be rated a remarkable debut. (Dodd Mead, \$8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Judson Philips, who as every mystery buff knows is also Hugh Pentecost, brings back one-legged investigator Peter Styles in *Murder as the Curtain Rises*. A famous screen star, paralyzed in a racing accident, opens a highly successful theater group in New England. He is very popular and much admired; then his wife is murdered. At this point Peter Styles enters. The solution is rather routine and the book is not an especially memorable one considering the stature of its creator. (Dodd Mead, \$8.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Mr. H. R. F. Keating, whose books about Inspector Ghote of the Bombay Police are deservedly remarkably popular, brings his rather timid but always efficient little detective to America in *Go West, Inspector Ghote*. He comes to California to try and entice home a young woman who has joined a spiritual community, or ashram, somewhere north of Los Angeles. Clearly the greatly gifted Mr. Keating intended this one to be a satire, as the American private eye is the prototype of everything that could be wrong, with an ex-cop circa 1932. When someone does in the spiritual leader of the community, the police investigate. Of course it is Ghote who wraps the case up on highly unfamiliar ground. Not to be taken seriously, this is light fun for the many fans of the little man from India. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Robert Barnard, who made a remarkable debut with *Death of a Mystery Writer* (nominated for the Edgar) and who did a fine piece of work in *Death in a Cold Climate*, now offers his latest, *Death of a Perfect Wife*. Here Mr. Barnard shifts gears and concentrates almost entirely on characterization, at which he is very good indeed. The "perfect mother" is anything but that: she is a monster who makes life unbearable for everyone around her. Her two sons plan to kill her as

the only relief in sight, but two days before their planned attack she is murdered by person or persons unknown. The people come to life on every page, but it must be added that the plot itself is feeble and the solution will not satisfy most readers. (Scribners, \$9.95)

★ ★ ★

One of the truly great detectives in the literature is M. Pinaud of the Paris Surete, the creation of Pierre Audemars. His adventures are almost always excellent, and the newest one, *And One for the Dead*, is no exception. This time the head of the Surete gets into personal trouble and Pinaud is called upon to get him out again. The way he goes about his task will keep any reader turning the pages, but particular notice must be given to the exquisite way in which his platonic relationship with his superior's young and neglected wife is detailed. Mr. Audemars writes literature, regardless of the genre he has chosen. (Walker and Co., \$9.95)

★ ★ ★

The many fans of P. D. James will be happy to know that three of her books featuring Adam Dalgliesh of Scotland Yard have been put together in a single volume called *Crime Times Three*. The individual titles are *Cover Her Face*, *A Mind to Murder*, and *Shroud for a Nightingale*. The format is quality paperback, the publisher Scribners, the price \$9.95.

★ ★ ★

PAPERBACK NOTES: The newly designed first books from Raven House (Worldwide) are *The Moses Bottle* by Russell Read and *Danger on Cue* by Rebecca Halland. Both authors are admitted pseudonyms; both are members of the Mystery Writers of America. The books are \$2.25 each. Two past masters who never miss are Michael Gilbert whose *The Killing of Katie Steelstock* is now available from Penguin at \$2.95. It's a dandy. You will also enjoy Sebastien Japrisot's *One Deadly Summer* also from Penguin at \$2.95. This same publisher offers Graham Greene's classic *The Confidential Agent* at \$2.95 and Peter Lovesey's Sergeant Cribb in *Invitation to a Dynamite Party* at \$2.50. You won't want to miss either the book or the TV series, both of which are excellent. Bantam this month brings back Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver in *She Came Back*, which is \$2.25 well spent. ●

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